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Deposited in DRO:

08 October 2010

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Rowe, C. (2007) 'Plato and the art of philosophical writing', Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521859325>

Publisher's copyright statement:

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Additional information:

Sample chapter deposited. 'Preliminaries: reading Plato', pp.1-52.

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Preliminaries: reading Plato

I INTRODUCTION

This is a book about Plato as a writer of philosophy: probably the most accomplished and sophisticated such writer the western world has known, but also one of the most puzzling. One of the chief puzzles about Plato's writing, and the one from which I shall begin, is its enormous *variety*. Why should he write in so many different ways? Philosophers, surely, only need to write in one way – as clearly and intelligibly as possible. Granted, virtually every item within the Platonic corpus is written in the same general format, that of imaginary conversations (reported or direct) between two or more interlocutors. However, this format is deployed in markedly varying fashions, and not only that, but often with what appear to be markedly varying outcomes. It sometimes appears almost as if different parts of the Platonic *oeuvre* might have been written by different people.¹ Most strikingly, while a significant number of dialogues, mainly short ones, take the form of an apparently open-ended exploration of particular subjects (often particular virtues – what I shall prefer to call 'excellences': *aretai*), led by a Socrates who continually advocates the importance of such – apparently open-ended – exploration and inquiry, other dialogues seem to show us a quite different Socrates, and a different Plato. Thus, most notoriously, the Socrates of the *Republic* – a work which will figure prominently in the present book – appears, at least on first reading, as an advocate of a closed society in which philosophy, instead of being the instrument of intellectual liberation that those other shorter dialogues seem to promise to make it, becomes the instrument of a political structure in which 'liberation' would

¹ By and large there is now consensus about which dialogues within the traditional corpus are by Plato and which are spurious; only one or two items are still debated, notably the *First Alcibiades*, *Hippias Major*, and *Clitophon*. (I myself think all three of these certainly spurious, along with all the *Letters*. *Menexenus* is by now surely off the doubtful list.)

evidently consist, for the majority of the population, in their control and manipulation by the few (philosophers).

How to explain this and other examples of the way Plato apparently changed, or wavered, in his approach to philosophy and to the writing of it: that will be one of the major tasks to be attempted in the following pages,² along with the task of explaining what it is, exactly, that Plato wanted to achieve, and thought he could achieve, by writing as he did. And that, for anyone who has seriously read any part of his *oeuvre* (i.e. by reading any dialogue from beginning to end, rather than just conning pre-selected passages, torn from their contexts), is the biggest question of all. As one of a fine group of undergraduates in Durham recently put it to me, Plato is 'weird', because he makes any reader work so hard to see what it is that he is up to – what he is using his characters to *say*, or in other words what he wants the reader to extract from his text.³ Studiously (it seems) leaving himself off the list of speakers on every occasion, or at least not appearing in person, he leaves us to guess where to locate his voice. The best guess must be that it is normally the main speaker that speaks for him – and so, since Socrates is usually that main speaker, the chances are that Socrates' voice will also, normally, be Plato's (see section 4 below).⁴ But then Socrates himself so often tells us that he has no answers – and when he does seem to come up with answers, they are not always the ones we might have expected, or hoped for (I refer again to the *Republic* as my central example).

At issue here is nothing less than what some might call the meaning of Plato, and of Platonism: 'Platonism', that is, in the sense of what it is that Plato stands for. At the most basic level, is he a philosopher who wishes for nothing so much as to *make his readers think for themselves*, somehow to make use of their own inner resources, without trying to weigh them down too heavily with doctrine? Or is he, on the contrary, someone who writes in order to impart *doctrines*? These are the lines along which the longest-running dispute among Plato's interpreters – beginning, strangely, even with his immediate successors, who might have been expected to know how to read him – has permanently been drawn. However, each of the two types of interpretation appears just as problematical as the other. If the

² The outcome of my argument will be to put the emphasis on that 'apparently' in 'apparently changed'. Plato changed a great deal less than appearances might suggest.

³ 'Nothing is a matter of course: everything can be called into question. To read Plato demands a far higher degree of vigilance and activity than any other philosopher asks for. Time after time, we are forced to make our choice, to decide how we should interpret what we are reading' (Tigerstedt 1977: 99).

⁴ See also Kraut 1992: 25–30.

first is right, then why is there so much by way of what look like positive doctrines in at least a significant proportion of the dialogues? And if the second, then why on earth did Plato not try to impart his teaching in a more direct way?

Defenders of the first type of interpretation will typically concentrate their fire on the talk of 'doctrines'. They will propose that Plato has few if any of *those*, pointing to that very richness (I called it variety) of Plato's writing, and explaining it either as proof of his versatility, or else as a sign of the kind of process of continual development and maturation that we should expect of any good philosopher. Talk of 'versatility' is in danger of suggesting that we can retreat into interpreting each dialogue on its own (as some scholars in the last two centuries have attempted to do), and there are too many connections between them, too many constants, to make that a viable proposition.⁵ But again, if Plato was a doctrinalist, why was he not more open and direct about it? Because, say some defenders of the 'doctrinal' sort of interpretation, Plato thought his ideas incapable of being properly conveyed in writing; the dialogues are a sort of invitation to the feast, offering an initial encounter with fundamental ideas that could not be fully grasped without deepened contact through the medium of oral discussion within the walls and porticoes of the Academy. Yet what these interpreters generally propose for the main feast centres on a metaphysical system (including a set of first principles) that generally seems a good deal less interesting philosophically – whether to most ancient or to modern tastes – than what we find on or just under the surface of the dialogues themselves. Even more importantly, such interpreters fail to explain why, on their account, Plato needed to write out so many and such varied invitations: so many dialogues, small, medium-sized, large, massive, containing a wealth of action, argument, imagery, all sorts of other varieties of brilliance – why go on writing them, throughout a lifetime, if they were only the first step, and to be superseded by a higher (and not so far obviously more illuminating)⁶ state of understanding?

Despite what I have just said, my own interpretation of Plato, or at any rate of Plato *as a writer*, as it unfolds, will turn out to have at least as much

⁵ That is, if we want (as I presume most will want) to take Plato seriously as a philosopher. Of course if one decides in advance that he is (e.g.) a dramatist rather than a philosopher, then the objection might not apply. Grote 1865, a brilliant account in its own way, may be said to have tested to destruction the idea that we can appreciate Plato fully without at some point trying to relate systematically what we discover in one dialogue to what we discover in another. (Grote himself was reacting to what he – rightly – saw as the oversystematization of Plato by Neoplatonizing interpreters.)

⁶ I refer here simply to the apparent philosophical aridity of the reconstructed 'unwritten doctrines' (Aristotle's phrase) of Plato on which such interpreters often pin their hopes.

in common with that of the second, 'doctrinal', group of interpreters as with that of the first, who may be very loosely termed 'sceptical'.⁷ I shall certainly want to reject the understanding of Platonism put forward by the particular 'doctrinal' interpreters I had in mind in the preceding paragraph,⁸ but there are certain things that they seem to me to have got right (as, for example, when they insist that Plato does not always say, at any one point, everything that he has in mind, or in hand; or, more generally, when they tell us that we frequently need to look below the surface of the text to find its real intention). It is interpreters of the 'sceptical' mould that I shall treat as my more immediate opponents, and among that rather broad group, one set of interpreters in particular: those who divide off certain parts of the Platonic corpus as 'Socratic' – the 'Socratic dialogues' being those mainly shorter, allegedly 'exploratory' dialogues that I have referred to, dating (it seems) from somewhere near the beginning of Plato's writing career – and who by so doing shift the locus of what is most authentically Platonic to the period of writing that followed. The key moment in Plato's development, from that perspective, was the break from the master, Socrates, the moment when the younger man started writing more ambitious and positive works (especially the *Republic*), whatever the degree of attachment he may have felt to the successive outcomes of these.⁹

Perhaps as much as anything else, it will be my aim in the present book to replace this way of dividing up Plato's work, which in my view has become the single greatest obstacle to a proper understanding of Plato and

⁷ The term will roughly fit, insofar as the ancient and original sceptics – one variety of whom developed their views inside Plato's Academy itself, a few generations after Plato's death – were people who perpetually *looked* (the Greek verbs are *skopein*, *skopeisthai*, the noun *skepsis*), without ever finding anything solid they could rely on. Academic sceptics read Plato as a sceptic: some of the dialogues – especially the so-called 'Socratic' group (see below) – may superficially attract such a reading, but no modern interpreter would be likely to find it satisfactory. It is thus safe enough to borrow the term 'sceptical' for that broad church of non-'doctrinalist' readers of Plato. The members of this same broad church tend also to suppose that their non-'doctrinal' Plato was typically ready to review his ideas, to modify, abandon and replace them – to 'mature' and 'develop', as I put it in the preceding paragraph: in short, to use a standard term, the majority of such interpreters are 'developmentalists', by contrast with the 'unitarianism' of the their 'doctrinal' rivals, and I shall generally, if somewhat loosely and inaccurately, treat the labels 'sceptical' and 'developmentalist', on the one hand, and 'doctrinalist' and 'unitarian' on the other, as more or less interchangeable. I shall shortly be picking a quarrel with one very common kind of modern 'sceptical developmentalist': the kind that divides up the corpus into 'Socratic' ('early'), 'middle' and 'late' periods.

⁸ These are the members of the so-called 'Tübingen school', including most importantly Hans-Joachim Krämer, Konrad Gaiser, and among contemporary scholars, Thomas Szlezák: see especially Szlezák 1985 and 2004.

⁹ Since I am speaking here of 'sceptical' interpreters as opposed to 'doctrinal' ones (in my admittedly very crude distinction), the attachment will be less than would be implied by the use of the term 'doctrine'. Doctrines, for some philosophers, will not be suitable things for philosophers to have – as opposed to ideas or theories, which will be perfectly respectable.

Platonism.¹⁰ For it will be one of my core claims that in fact the post-‘Socratic’ dialogues in all central respects depend and build on, even as they may extend, ideas and arguments contained in the ‘Socratic’ dialogues. (The scare quotes around ‘Socratic’ are to be taken seriously; there is in my view no group of dialogues which can helpfully be labelled ‘Socratic’ as opposed to others.) That is, these dialogues, along with others not normally labelled as ‘Socratic’ but nevertheless apparently predating the *Republic*, do crucial philosophical work which is not only not superseded by what comes later, but which we need to have properly grasped – and also to *keep in mind* – if we are fully to understand what we find in the *Republic* and other supposedly post-‘Socratic’ dialogues.¹¹ Importantly, I shall also claim that Plato remained faithful to the very notion of philosophy that is developed in, and in part illustrated by, the ‘Socratic’ dialogues. (Even the philosopher-rulers of the *Republic* will turn out to be formed after Socrates’ image.¹² But this is to anticipate.)

For many if not most readers of Plato these will look unlikely claims – to say the least. As it happens, the ‘doctrinal’ interpreters¹³ tend to be hardly less *Republic*-centred than the ‘sceptical’ ones, insofar as for them too it is

¹⁰ The next greatest, in my view, is the idea, much favoured by ‘doctrinalists’ of all eras, that Plato was, more than anything else, an other-worldly metaphysician who thought that the highest kind of existence would be spent in the contemplation of pure being (*tel sim.*). See especially chapters 2, 7, 8 and 9 below. This approach, for its part, entails leaving out so much of the content of the dialogues, takes so little account of what Plato actually *wrote*, that I for one find it hard to take it at all seriously. Or, to put it another way, a book like the present one, which aims to explain why Plato wrote as he did, is not likely to be favourable to an approach that by its very nature leaves it entirely mysterious why Plato should have written so much that had so little bearing on what he supposedly intended his readers to sign up to.

¹¹ I shall not of course, impossibly, deny that there are also apparent, and important, discontinuities between the so-called ‘Socratic’ dialogues and what follows. But it will be my argument that these discontinuities are best seen against the background of an essential continuity – one that after all would be no less than one would expect, given that Plato keeps Socrates on, both in the *Republic* and in other ‘non-Socratic’ dialogues, as main speaker. I agree wholeheartedly with David Sedley (Sedley 2004: 14) that Plato ‘emphasiz[ed] the continuity in his development [i.e. with what Sedley calls the “semi-historical” Socrates featured in the early dialogues: 3] rather than acknowledging any radical break’. However while acknowledging Plato’s own perspective on the matter, Sedley himself ‘separat[es] an early Socratic phase from one or more subsequent Platonic phases’ (ibid.), thus aligning himself with Vlastos 1991, and against Kahn 1996 – for whom the ‘Socratic dialogues’ are written to look forward to the *Republic* and other ‘middle’ dialogues, and so ‘can be adequately understood only from the perspective of these middle works’ (Kahn 1996: 60). My own view is exactly the reverse of Kahn’s (though I register unease about the use of the term ‘middle’: on dating in general, see section 10 below).

¹² Still more surprisingly, from the perspective of any current interpretation, the same will be true of the members of the Nocturnal Council in the *Laos* (see chapter 10, n. 2 below).

¹³ Or at least, modern ‘doctrinalists’: for their ancient counterparts, it was the great cosmological dialogue *Timaeus* that counted as more central. But Plato himself takes care to link *Timaeus* with *Republic*, making the conversation represented (fictionally ‘recorded’) in the former take place on the day after the conversation, ‘reported’ by Socrates, that constitutes the latter. See ch. 10.

the *Republic* – and other dialogues that the ‘sceptics’ call ‘mature’ – that take us closer to the heart of Plato: thinking of Platonism as nothing if not a *system* of thought, and more or less unchanging, they then propose *Republic*, along with *Philebus* and *Timaeus*, as the works that will give us the most information for fixing the outlines of that system. The so-called ‘Socratic’ dialogues (so-called, that is, mainly by the ‘sceptics’), for the doctrinalists, are of relatively little interest in themselves, just as for the ‘sceptics’ these dialogues tend to represent the parts of Plato, i.e. those Socratic parts, that he left behind, whether this is taken to be a bad or a good thing.¹⁴ One of the main tasks of the present book will be to show that both the ‘sceptical’ approach, which sees the *Republic* as marking Plato’s break with Socrates, and its ‘doctrinalist’ counterpart, which tends to assimilate the ‘Socratic’ dialogues to the *Republic*, are mistaken: the Socrates of the *Republic* is, with certain important qualifications, the Socrates of the ‘Socratic’ dialogues; but this latter Socrates is not fashioned after the ‘doctrinalists’ image. What should have emerged from my argument by the end of the book is a quite unusual, not to say revolutionary, picture of Plato and his thought. However whether or not this picture will appear plausible will depend entirely on my ability to persuade the reader of the usefulness of certain interpretative moves; or, to put it the other way round, my ability to persuade the reader to share my analysis of Plato’s strategies as a philosophical writer. The title of the book may in this sense be taken as a true disjunction: I hope to understand what Plato stands for by understanding the reasons, methods and purposes of Platonic writing. (I admit, however, that many times over the detailed argument will turn out to be the other way round; what Plato wants to say and how he says it are mutually interdependent topics.)

It will be useful here to give a quite full and detailed outline of the key interpretative moves that will underpin my approach, before I turn, in the main part of the book, to particular themes and particular dialogues. The Table of Contents gives a fair indication of the selection of dialogues that will provide the main material for my discussion. Particularly prominent will be *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Euthydemus*, *Gorgias*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*,

¹⁴ It will be a bad thing for those who prefer what they see as Socrates’ mode of doing philosophy in those dialogues to what they see as his appalling demeanour in the *Republic* (see above); a good thing for those many people who – quite misguidedly, in my own view – tend to think of Socratic methods and ideas as interesting but naive and limited. There has been talk in recent years, especially among North American scholars (of whom Francisco Gonzalez is among the most eloquent: see e.g. Gonzalez 1998), of a ‘third way’ of interpreting Plato, i.e. one that is describable neither as ‘sceptical’ nor as ‘dogmatic’. Insofar as that could be said of my own reading, it too will belong to this ‘third way’. However the main defining feature of this ‘third’ mode of reading seems to be just that it isn’t either of the other two, both of which – as I began by saying – are plainly, by themselves, unsatisfactory.

Republic, and *Timaeus*. I shall have a fair amount, too, to say about *Theaetetus*, but rather little about the *Parmenides*, and nothing or virtually nothing about *Cratylus*, *Laws*, *Philebus*, *Protagoras* and two dialogues closely connected with the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Politicus*. I shall, however, advance a general thesis about those five big dialogues *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, *Timaeus* and *Laws*, in which Socrates is not assigned the role of main speaker, as he is in every other genuine dialogue; clearly, given my overall thesis about the closeness of Plato to his Socrates, this is likely to appear a significant shift, suggesting – perhaps – that disciple did after all finally give up on master (for, as it happens, all five of these dialogues appear to be datable to the latest part of Plato's life: see section 10 below). I shall suggest, rather, that in demoting Socrates Plato distances *himself*, in varying degrees, from the positions he assigns to Socrates' replacements.

2 THE NATURE AND IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE, FOR PLATO

Plato evidently held dialogue to be fundamental to philosophy: Socrates never ceases to treat dialogue in this way, and for the most part – in Plato's works – carries on his business, which he calls philosophy, through dialogue. But why should dialogue be so important for the philosopher? The answer, it seems, has something and everything to do with Socrates', and Plato's, recognition of the need for *questioning*: only if we go on questioning our ideas can we ever hope to reach the truth, if we can reach it at all.

Some modern interpreters have understood this questioning in terms specifically of 'refutation',¹⁵ because of the overwhelming tendency of Socrates' questioning, in the 'Socratic' dialogues, to end in the discomfiture of whoever or whatever is being questioned.¹⁶ They have then gone on to propose that refutation could even somehow generate, discover, truth, by itself; and such interpreters have reconstructed on Socrates' behalf the assumptions that would be required to make that possible.¹⁷ (I take it that

¹⁵ See chapter 3 below.

¹⁶ Such interpreters typically call Socrates' method 'elenctic'. In fact the Greek noun *elenchos* and the associated verbs, which Plato frequently applies to Socratic activity, as often refer to questioning and challenge as to refutation as such: see Tarrant 2002. I myself will propose that the fact that Socratic dialectic, in the 'Socratic' dialogues, nearly always ends in the refutation of the interlocutor has rather more to do with Plato's rejection of the positions Socrates' interlocutors represent than with the essential nature of Socratic method.

¹⁷ Here is Donald Davidson, building on Vlastos 1983: 'the elenchus would make for truth simply by insuring [*sic*] coherence in a set of beliefs if one could assume that in each of us there are always unshakable true beliefs inconsistent with the false. It is not necessary that these truths be the same for each of us, nor that we be able to identify them except through the extended use of the elenchus. Thus someone who practices the elenchus can, as Socrates repeatedly did, claim that he does not

Socrates and Plato would have been repulsed by any special theories that find dialogical conclusions, in certain contexts, as all that there is to *constitute* truth;¹⁸ whatever else they hold, they will certainly hold that the truth is the truth regardless of what anyone thinks it is, and indeed regardless of whether anyone at all has it in mind.) Reconstructions of this sort are a reaction, in itself noble enough, to the need somehow to square Socrates' repeated claim that he knows nothing with his more than occasional tendency to behave as if there are some things, at least, that he is pretty sure about, even knows. However the combination in Socrates of these two features – as a know-nothing, and (as one might put it) as a conviction philosopher – is perfectly intelligible without any such rich supplementation of Plato's text.¹⁹ The most for which we have textual warrant is the idea that a continuous process of questioning, whether of one person by another or of oneself by oneself, along a particular line may lead to results that for all practical purposes are reliable and unlikely to need to be abandoned. This process of questioning represents the essence of the Socratic – and, as I hold, also the Platonic – notion of philosophy, and it is one that is most consistently displayed in action in the so-called 'Socratic' dialogues. Philosophy, as an activity, is the 'art of dialogue', whether internal or with others:²⁰ *dialektikē technē* in Greek, and hence 'dialectic'. (The 'art of dialogue': sc. through progressive questioning, and on the sorts of subjects expertise in which contributes to wisdom, *sophia*, *philo-sophia* being the love or pursuit of wisdom.)

know what is true; it is enough that he has a method that leads to truth. The only question is whether there is reason to accept the assumption.

'I think there is good reason to believe the assumption is true – true enough, anyway, to insure that when our beliefs are consistent they will in most large matters be true. The argument for this is long, and I have spelled it out as well as I can elsewhere' (Davidson 1993: 184–5, referring to Davidson 1983 [2001]).

¹⁸ I mean no disrespect here to the late Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose subtle take on Plato is beautifully expounded by François Renaud in Renaud 1999: Gadamer himself accepts that a Plato who saw the true implications of his position would no longer be a Platonist ('Platon war kein Platoniker', cited by Renaud from Gadamer's *Gesammelte Werke* 2, 1977: 508).

¹⁹ Briefly: there are things that Socrates will happily claim to be sure about, and even, in unguarded moments, to know, on the basis of argument; e.g., at the most general level, that knowledge and excellence matter more to everyone than anything else. But underlying his general position is a sensitivity to the limits of what mere human beings can achieve, which causes him typically to deny that *he* knows what he is talking about, even while he allows that others, perhaps, may know (or come to know) more than he does. See especially section 10, and chapters 1 and 8, below.

²⁰ Because of his position as a know-nothing, Socrates typically stresses his own need to be in conversation with others. But when Plato has others describe him, as in the *Symposium*, they vividly describe, among other habits of his, a tendency to spend long periods in self-absorbed thought; and he typically refers to examining *himself* in the same breath as he talks about examining others. See chapter 3 below; for thinking described explicitly as internal dialogue, see, e.g., *Theaetetus* 189D–190A.

3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 'THE ART OF DIALOGUE' ('DIALECTIC') AND THE WRITTEN DIALOGUE FORM

It would be all too easy to slip from the simple proposal that all Platonic dialogues are 'philosophical' (at least to the degree that they were written by an author everyone agrees to have been a philosopher) to supposing that all equally display philosophy in action; and from there, given that the kinds of discussion we find in different dialogues are different, to supposing that Plato had different ways of conceiving of philosophy. Sometimes, as in the *Timaeus*, dialogue gives way to monologue: by the argument in question, Plato will on that occasion have given up on dialogue as the proper medium of philosophy. For the 'sceptical' brand of philosophers, this is likely to be a perfectly acceptable outcome, since few of them will share any great commitment to dialogue as such over monologue as a way of conducting philosophy in the first place,²¹ and for them it might even be something of a relief to be able to think of Plato as giving up on it (as their Plato regularly gives up on things);²² and for the 'doctrinalists' Plato, too, dialogue may be equally dispensable – a means to a preliminary cleansing of minds from misapprehensions, and as a kind of intellectual gymnastics, but hardly the stuff of real philosophy.²³

However, such responses would vastly underestimate the nature and complexity of written dialogue in its Platonic mode.²⁴ Above all, we need to remember the fact that a written dialogue possesses two extra dimensions, one of which will always, and the other will usually, be absent from a real dialogue, i.e. from any live conversation (or indeed one that is merely recorded in writing): (1) an author, and (2) an audience. It is hardly in doubt that Plato constructed and wrote his dialogues *for* an audience (or audiences), given the earnestness with which his main speakers address their interlocutors. He had a purpose in writing – he had things he wanted to say to his audience, ways in which he wanted to affect them. And he was presumably free to write as he pleased: he could set up the conversation as

²¹ Especially, perhaps, if the dialogue may be internal: what harm will it do to redescribe any serious internal thought as a kind of questioning? (That, however, would be to miss Socrates' point, which is about the need to *challenge* one's own and others' thinking.)

²² A special impatience with dialogue form is evinced by the habit some interpreters have – those brought up within the analytical tradition – of trying to reducing Socratic arguments to a series of numbered (and impersonal) propositions.

²³ 'Dialectic' itself, on this account, ultimately becomes severed from conversation and dialogue altogether, and becomes a term for whatever method will lead to philosophical truth.

²⁴ That is, whatever other writers of philosophical dialogues might make or might have made of the medium: let them be set to one side.

he liked, where he liked, and between whatever characters/interlocutors he liked. If, then, we are fully to understand what is going on,²⁵ and indeed if we are even to have any chance of grasping Plato's underlying argument, we have no option but to try to come to terms in each case with a whole series of different relationships: between author and text (and its argument – both the philosophical argument, and the 'argument' in the sense of the overall direction or directions of the text); between author and characters/speakers, especially the main speaker;²⁶ between author and audience; between the speakers themselves. But this already means that a written dialogue is something considerably more than a piece of philosophy. It is philosophy with its participants, and their utterances and actions, shaped, directed, set up, stage-managed by someone for someone else.

I do not mean to deny that it would be perfectly possible to write philosophical dialogues in which the dialogue and the philosophy (in the Socratic-Platonic sense, of progressive questioning; see above) were simply co-extensive. Interlocutor A, a voice perhaps with a name but no necessary identity, would state a position, which interlocutor B, another similarly unspecific voice, then questioned, leading A to restate the original position; if this imaginary dialogue were more than a few paragraphs long, then B would again raise problems with the new statement – and so on. This would be the basic, stripped-down version of Socratic dialectic.²⁷ But no actual Platonic dialogue is like this. For a start, A and B²⁸ will be identified as particular individuals, usually with names, and always with identifiable characteristics: A will more often than not be Socrates, and B will be a general,²⁹ a rhapsode,³⁰ a sophist,³¹ a sophist/rhetorician,³² a friend of Socrates',³³ a brother of Plato's³⁴ . . . And the nature and course of the conversation that ensues between A and B will always partly be determined by the choice of the person to play the role of B as much as by the choice of the person to play the role of A – which, if it is Socrates, will ensure that the

²⁵ I assume that we may ignore the possibility that Plato was a lazy author, who did not make the most of the opportunities available to him.

²⁶ Plato's dialogues always have a main speaker; this is no doubt itself something to be explained. (It will turn out to be significant that there is always, within a single dialogue, one perspective that is privileged – by the author – over the others.)

²⁷ The model is based on a combination of passages from the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic* with Socrates' actual practice in a range of other dialogues.

²⁸ I here for the moment leave out dialogues that lapse into monologue, i.e. where B ceases to play any audible part: *Menexenus* as well as *Timaeus* (where there is a C and a D as well as a B).

²⁹ Or generals: see *Laches*, where Socrates talks to the generals Laches and Nicias.

³⁰ I refer to Ion in *Ion*. ³¹ Say, Hippias in *Hippias Minor*, Protagoras in *Protagoras* . . .

³² Thrasymachus in *Republic* (especially Book 1). ³³ Crito in *Crito*, Phaedo in *Phaedo*.

³⁴ Or brothers: Glaucon and Adimantus in *Republic* (especially Books II–X).

conversation is or becomes philosophical,³⁵ since that is his preoccupation, not to say his obsession. (Conversely, if A is not Socrates, that will leave the actual nature of the conversation in principle open: more on this possibility in a moment.) Socrates will have a different kind of conversation with a general from the one he will have with a rhapsode, and a different one with a general or a rhapsode from the one he will have with a friend of his, who is used to his ways. Or, to put it another way, a conversation between Socrates and Ion, rhapsode, on the nature of the rhapsode's and the poet's 'art', as in the *Ion*, will not be the same as a conversation between two anonymous philosophers on the same subject. The conversations on the subject of justice between the sophist/rhetorician Thrasymachus and Socrates, on the one hand, in *Republic* I, and between Socrates and Glaucon and Adimantus, Plato's brothers, in *Republic* II–X on the other *are* actually quite different: at any rate, one is confrontational in form, the other cooperative. (And even as he talks to Glaucon and Adimantus, Socrates repeatedly refers to another sort of conversation that he might have had, using different premisses: see especially chapter 5 below.) Evidently Plato wanted these differences, since he put them there, and it must be our business to ask why he did so.

We may presumably begin by dismissing the possibility that the characterization (and the dramatic action: that too we must take into account) in the dialogues is for merely ornamental purposes, just on the grounds that it is so obtrusive. It is part of that 'weirdness' of Plato's texts that they force us to try to see whatever point it is that they are making through the fog of a conversation with *this* individual, or these individuals, now. I also propose to dismiss the possibility that Plato is interested in, say, Ion, or Laches, for Ion's or Laches' sake (if he is writing for us, his readers, or any of our predecessors, why on earth should he expect them, let alone *us*, to be interested in such figures, neither of whom left much else by way of an imprint on history?). Rather, his interest in them is because of the types of people they are (a rhapsode and a general), and also because the types they represent are, at least within the fictional context, real and familiar – or would have been to the original audience. That is, the *Ion*, the *Laches*, and other dialogues show the philosopher in conversation with some of the sorts of people we, or our ancient counterparts, might encounter; people who, more importantly, hold (or can be induced to entertain) *attitudes or views* that we might encounter, and might even share. To that extent,³⁶

³⁵ That is, it will involve questioning and challenge – and will also be about subjects that matter (not just the weather, or the quality of the wine).

³⁶ And only to that extent: below, I shall enthusiastically reject the idea that Plato thinks the reader can enter into any meaningful *dialogue* with his texts (or any text).

the conversations between the interlocutors are also conversations between the author and the reader – if rather peculiar conversations, given that the reader's answers are already given for him, by the interlocutor. By the same token, to the degree that the conversations usually involve Socrates' trying to unsettle an interlocutor's apparent certainty about something, or introducing him to new points of view, or doing both things together, we may reasonably suppose it to be Plato's purpose similarly to unsettle the reader.³⁷ If so, the dialogues will also have a persuasive function, i.e. in addition to any purely philosophical one; and indeed in such a case the philosophical will be employed in the service of the persuasive.

The point may be generalized. If 'philosophy', as I propose, for Socrates and Plato is fundamentally a matter of progress through questioning towards a presumptive truth, then the persuasive function of written dialogue – even in the case of the 'Socratic' dialogues – will usually be more prominent and/or immediate than the philosophical one.³⁸ It is in principle possible that Plato's arguments reproduce internal dialogues of his own, a kind of talking to himself.³⁹ However some of the dialogues are clearly not like that – that is, the arguments they contain are not the kind of arguments Plato (Socrates)⁴⁰ would have with himself, since they start from other people's assumptions; and in general there seems just too large an element of *staging* – Socrates always seems ahead of his interlocutors, rather than moving along with them.⁴¹ A dialogue like the *Ion* is less like a piece of dialectic than a dialectical clash between two views of poetry and expertise. In *Laches*, the element of dialectical progress is more prominent, and in *Charmides* and *Lysis* it is more prominent still, with the consequence that any sense of confrontation between speakers and views is gradually lessened, and agreement may even be in sight – before, in each of these three

³⁷ Any reader, that is, who is in a condition analogous to that of the interlocutor (or who knows someone who is).

³⁸ Some interpreters plausibly attribute a fundamentally 'protreptic' function to Plato's writing as a whole; i.e. they see it as designed (perhaps *inter alia*) to turn people towards philosophy. But as will soon emerge, I believe this understates the case, if 'turning to philosophy' is understood merely as questioning ourselves and the way we presently think: what Plato is after is to change our whole view of the world and ourselves, in a particular and determinate way.

³⁹ See e.g., Sedley 2003: 1 ('... these ... question-and-answer sequences can legitimately be read as *Plato thinking aloud*'). This would take us some way back in the direction of an identification between dialogue and dialogue-writing; more on this in the following section.

⁴⁰ On the relationship between Plato and (his) Socrates, see the next section.

⁴¹ I am aware that these are far from being knock-down arguments. Nor do I mean to rule out Sedley's option altogether (see n. 39 above), at least to the extent that Socrates' dialectical exchanges with his interlocutors will in general serve as models of how philosophy is done. I simply find this kind of explanation of Plato's use of the dialogue form unsatisfactory, and not least because there is so much in the dialogues that does not consist of 'question-and-answer sequences'.

dialogues, the conversation formally ends in *aporia*, 'perplexity' or '*impasse*'. So there is plenty of what will count as philosophical by Socrates'/Plato's measure, even if it is a written version of it (and to that extent inauthentic: it is Plato's recreation of progress that might have been made between Socrates and some other person, if they had had the occasion to talk together). But the immediate overall effect on the reader, for all that some interpreters have suggested otherwise, is likely to be less a sense of engagement in the argument, which he or she will usually find fairly baffling, than a sense of sympathy with one or other of the interlocutors. That, certainly, is how modern readers tend to feel, many of them taking at once against Socrates; I hazard that ancient readers felt much the same. (Bafflement, a sense of someone's being done down, but still also a sense of things being less settled than they were before?)

When we turn to other, allegedly 'non-Socratic', parts of the corpus, the proportion of dialectic – that is, of passages that to some degree approach my imaginary model, sketched above, of what pure philosophical dialogue might be – to other kinds of matter in most cases drops considerably. In *Phaedo*, there are four blocks of argument, carefully marked off from the rest; in *Symposium*, a solitary stretch of dialectic between Socrates and Agathon, Diotima and Socrates; *Republic* 1 is on the model of a *Charmides* or *Lysis*, but the remaining nine books contain relatively little by way of genuine exchange; *Timaeus*, as I have said, is virtually a monologue; and so on. Many, as I have already noted, see all this as a sign that Plato is moving away from the Socratic way of doing philosophy, i.e. through dialogue and conversation (despite *Theaetetus* and *Philebus*, both superlatively dialectical in character; both throwbacks, according to the interpreters in question). My own view, by contrast, is that what the situation in the 'non-Socratic' (or post-'Socratic') dialogues marks is a change of strategy, not a change of mind. If Plato writes in a different way, that is because he has decided to approach his readers – who, in my view, were always his first preoccupation – by a different route. His aim is always to change people's perceptions, by variously stimulating and provoking them (us); even while insisting that philosophy is the key, he by no means always uses dialectic, or the written counterpart of dialectic, to achieve that stimulation and provocation. In fact philosophical dialectic is merely one of his tools. On occasion, as in the *Timaeus*, he can leave it in his bag entirely (and indeed, in a later chapter,⁴² I shall argue that *Timaeus*, the main speaker in that dialogue, is not a philosopher-dialectician at all, even if he has a more

⁴² Chapter 10.

than intelligent grasp of Platonic metaphysics). Or else, as in the *Laws*, he can set up a conversation between a philosopher and two non-philosophers who are specifically identified as incapable of dialectical exchange (it simply goes over their heads); a strategy that has immediate consequences for the level of the conversation. The Athenian visitor to Crete in *Laws* cannot, clearly, carry on a discussion with the philosophically unformed Clinias and Megillus of the sort that Socrates, albeit a still youthful one, can conduct, in the *Parmenides*, with the great Parmenides of Elea – the one named philosopher other than Socrates for whom Plato seems to have had any serious time – and his acolyte Zeno.

In short, Platonic written dialogue is not the same as dialectic (philosophy).⁴³ But this ought not to come as any great surprise. Socrates in the *Phaedrus* tells us roundly that writing is no more than the bastard step-brother of philosophy, among other things because it cannot answer back. Ask questions of any written document, and it goes on stolidly saying the same thing. Socrates obviously cannot be knowingly referring to the very (written) dialogues in which he participates, since from his point of view within the dialogue these are oral, but⁴⁴ we have no good reason to suppose that he means to exempt them from his strictures. Plato preferred to write in dialogue form, and he gives every sign of thinking dialogue the most valuable form of human activity. However his preference for writing in the form of dialogue is not *because* he thought dialogue so valuable as an activity (even if he might perhaps originally have started using dialogue form in imitation of, as a kind of recreation of, the real Socrates' favoured pursuit). For just as, self-evidently, there are different kinds of dialogue/conversation that one can have, most of them entirely unphilosophical, so there are many different kinds of written (Platonic) dialogue. That he employed dialogue form in different ways, some of them not portraying dialectic in action, does not in the least tend to indicate that he ever abandoned his view that *living* dialogue, based on questioning of oneself or others, on the most important subjects, was the only available means to intellectual progress. But that, in turn, need not have deterred him from continuing to place before us, in one extraordinary way after another, alternative visions of the

⁴³ And how could it be? Take the little *Menexenus*: in formal terms still a dialogue, because it begins with a short exchange between Socrates and Menexenus, but then a monologue – a mock-funeral speech – offered by Socrates to Menexenus. Then too the monologue itself contains hardly a trace of anything we – or Plato – might recognize as a philosophical argument (even while it refers implicitly to ideas that appear in more obviously philosophical/dialectical contexts). At the same time this little piece contains all the complexities, and raises all the questions (about the intended relationship of author to audience, and so on), that attach to its larger counterparts in the corpus.

⁴⁴ Pace Mackenzie 1982 (see chapter 11 below).

way we, and the world, are, and from presenting those visions in contrast to more familiar ones: that I take to be one of the commonest and most central functions of Platonic writing, from the smallest of its products to the largest.⁴⁵ Even if he thinks that we can only advance through dialectic, there is nothing incompatible between that and showing us how differently things might, or will, look, if only we could become able to see more clearly.

4 PLATO AND SOCRATES: MANY VOICES?

There is one standing issue in modern Platonic scholarship over which I may seem to have skated with nonchalance in the preceding section. In the present post-modernist (or post-post-modernist) age, literary interpreters in particular have become worried about the practice – enshrined in Platonic interpretation over two and a half millennia – of assuming that the Socrates of the dialogues speaks for Plato. In principle this worry seems entirely well motivated. The dialogues always contain more than one voice (except when they change to monologue, and sometimes perhaps even then),⁴⁶ and in principle it seems perfectly plausible to suppose that Plato *might* have wanted, sometimes (or even often), to side with Socrates' opponent(s) – or, at least, to see their positions as impeding endorsement of Socrates'. Or, again, he might sometimes just have wanted to distance himself from the old man. ('That's just going *too* far.') But it is hard to credit that Socrates' voice is not *in general* Plato's: why else would it always – or very nearly always – be his opponents, rather than Socrates, that are variously defeated, humiliated, or made to think again? Why, again, would Plato keep bringing Socrates back on stage, in dialogue after dialogue, in many cases to say what are often the same sorts of things and support the same sorts of positions, if he did not view those positions with favour? (I started in section 1 above with the *differences* between one dialogue, or group of dialogues, and another; the constants, despite those differences, should be obvious enough on any close reading.) In brief, the worry about making Plato's text univocal may have fine motives, but it is overdone and misplaced. By and large, Socrates is Plato's *portavoce*, his mouthpiece.

But here there is a complication. What about those occasions when Socrates says different things, instead of the same ones? What, for example, of those apparent inconcinnities between the *Republic* and the so-called

⁴⁵ This is not to say that all dialogues have this function, and certainly not that it is the exclusive function of all. There are also more specialized dialogues, e.g., *Parmenides*, or *Theaetetus*, and Plato is in any case far too sophisticated a writer and a thinker to be tied down by any simple description.

⁴⁶ See chapter 10 below.

'Socratic' dialogues from which I began in section 1? Of course, if these bother us at all, that will probably be a sign that we have already proposed to accept that Socrates speaks for Plato. To find him speaking as he does in the *Republic* is bothering precisely because, having got used to one kind of Platonic voice, we are suddenly presented with what looks like a new one. 'Plato has betrayed Socrates,' comes the cry (in the light of all those appalling political proposals), and the betrayal will seem all the worse because Plato keeps Socrates on, to all appearances simply substituting the new voice for the old one, with the result that he has 'Socrates' endorse ideas that, allegedly, would have had the real Socrates turning in his grave. Did ever a pupil treat his teacher worse?⁴⁷

I do not propose to enter into what is now an old controversy, about the relationship between Plato's Socrates (or any of his Socrateses?) and the historical, flesh-and-blood Socrates, beyond saying that I see no obstacle to supposing Plato's overall portrait of Socrates to be faithful to his own vision of the original one⁴⁸ – no obstacle, that is, unless it is the attribution to him of unpalatable and apparently un-Socratic ideas like the ones in the *Republic*. But in this case, as in some others, I believe we need to identify a further feature of Platonic writing that interpreters in general have either missed altogether or – more usually – seriously underplayed. Plato's Socrates speaks for most of the time with his own voice (and Plato's), but he can also 'speak with the vulgar'. That is, he can, on occasion, adopt the colouring and the premisses of his interlocutors or opponents, as an argumentative strategy. 'I would prefer not to go that way,' he will say, by implication, 'but if you

⁴⁷ I am here leaving to one side the further complications to the 'Socrates as mouthpiece' interpretation that go along with separating off the 'Socratic' dialogues from others – an approach that I have typically associated with the 'sceptical' brand of interpreters: on *their* view, of course, there will be distance between Plato and Socrates as soon as he embarks on his post-'Socratic' period (cf. n. 14 above). I leave these complications to one side for the obvious reason that I reject the approach from which they flow: *my* Socrates always, or nearly always, fully understands whatever it is that Plato puts in his mouth – even when we might want to protest that it is something the Socrates of the 'Socratic' dialogues, or the real Socrates, will never have thought of (of course, Socrates can't know that he's a character in a written dialogue, but that will usually not matter too much). That is, from Plato's perspective (I claim), any amount of extension, even of modification, of the kinds of things Plato might once have got from Socrates he still sees as *Socratic* – because he sees Socrates, and himself, as having bought into *a system of ideas* (representing the way things really are), which requires exploration rather than construction. Plato does not see himself, and Socrates, as putting together a theory, but rather as investigating the implications of a set of insights that he takes to be true and fundamental.

⁴⁸ A vision that will in fact be very complex, if one accepts the substance of the preceding note: 'Socrates' will not be co-extensive simply with what that particular historical person actually said and did, but will include whatever can legitimately be identified as belonging to that truthful picture of things that he – the historical person – had begun to sketch. For the implications of this approach in relation to Platonic metaphysics ('Forms'), see section 10 below.

insist, I will; and even so I shall give you good reason for coming over to my side.' Every reader accepts that there is an element of this in Books II–X of the *Republic*, where Socrates undertakes to show that justice 'pays' even if the just man receives none of the rewards of being just and all of the penalties that accrue to someone who has been found guilty of the worst injustices. What is not so usually noticed, or at least given sufficient emphasis, is that the whole political structure of 'Callipolis', the beautiful or 'ideal' city, is designed to cure a city that is already 'fevered' and *unideal*;⁴⁹ and that even the analysis of the four excellences or virtues (*aretai*) in Book IV, which derives from the construction of Callipolis, depends on the evidence of the behaviour of souls that are internally conflicted and thus themselves out of sorts. As I shall argue in detail in chapter 5, the net outcome is that there is a question-mark over the level of Socrates' (and Plato's) commitment to – or, perhaps better, enthusiasm for – the political and psychological analyses conducted in *Republic* IV: there is more than enough in those analyses that Socrates can accept to allow the overall argument to follow through, but the argument is itself shaped as much by the interlocutors' assumptions and starting-points as by his own. Left to himself, as I shall claim Socrates makes quite clear, he would have rather different things to say about the best kind of city, and the best state of the soul, just as he would argue differently⁵⁰ for the claim that justice 'pays'.

This is, however, already to anticipate a set of claims that need to be established in detail if they are to be introduced at all. At this early stage of my argument, my concern is still no more than to indicate the main interpretative strategies that I shall be deploying in the following chapters; and in that spirit I shall simply assert, for now, that I take it to be one of the key features of Plato's use of Socrates that he not infrequently does have him argue from premisses other than his own. However – and this is a crucial corollary, without which 'Socrates' might be in danger of being reduced to one of the 'eristics'⁵¹ that he likes to criticize – when Socrates *does* argue from others' premisses, Plato is always careful to avoid having him commit himself to anything that he would not accept on his own account. Thus *if* the best city had to address itself to the curing of internal 'fever', then

⁴⁹ The political arrangements sketched in Books II–IV are 'good', even 'correct' (v, 449A1–2); vi, 497B–D comes close to saying that the constitution of Callipolis is 'best', but in the sequel it is the issue of its possibility, and sustainability, that comes to dominate the discussion.

⁵⁰ And in fact has, already (in *Republic* I). None of this is intended to deny that the main political diagnosis of the *Republic*, and its prescriptions, are seriously meant: the question is just about where the argument should *start from*. See further chapter 5.

⁵¹ 'Eristics', in brief, are those who argue merely in order to win, without any regard to the truth: star examples are Euthydemus and his brother Dionysodorus in the *Euthydemus*.

it would look something like Callipolis; *if* we observe conflicted souls in action, then an account of the virtues or excellences will need to presuppose a divided soul – and so on. (These, it has to be said, are the easy cases; there will be others where one has to work rather hard to exempt Plato's Socrates from the charge of mere eristic opportunism. But see further in section 6 below.)

So there are, I claim, times when Plato's Socrates merely appears to be speaking with a different voice, and when actually, on closer analysis, he has simply borrowed it for the occasion. However there are also times when he seems genuinely to change his tune, as, most importantly, when he allows that the soul may come to be in such a condition that it is apparently dragged about, and the behaviour of its possessor – the agent – changed, by irrational desires working in conflict with the agent's own reasoning. This is in marked contrast to what is proposed in some dialogues, mainly but not exclusively the ones labelled 'Socratic', and provides what I take to be the only plausible grounds for a distinction – which I nevertheless still propose generally to reject – between the 'Socratic' and the 'Platonic' in Plato. In the 'Socratic' dialogues, and indeed even in the *Symposium*, one of the traditional immediately post-'Socratic' or 'middle' dialogues, our desires are all, and always, for what is really good for us, so that they cannot in fact conflict, despite appearances to the contrary; what causes us to go wrong – and that means everybody – is our beliefs, i.e. about what is good for us. This extraordinary set of claims is, or so it seems, and has been thought, very deliberately rejected, by Socrates himself, in *Republic* iv, in the course of his argument for the tripartition of the soul (based on the very capacity of our desires to conflict). Plato seems to want to justify this move on Socrates' part through a qualification to tripartition, introduced in Book x, that it does not apply to soul in its essence, only as we observe it in the hurly-burly of life; but it looks nonetheless as if the move is a significant one. For one thing, it means that Socrates will in fact have to take seriously the case of the 'fevered' city (insofar as the 'fever' results from internal conflict in individual souls), and so – it seems – the political structure that is proposed for controlling it. And yet there still are ways in which Plato's conception of the soul and of desire, and his theory of action, remain thoroughly indebted to the model apparently abandoned in *Republic* iv. (Indeed I shall argue that Plato thinks he can *preserve* that model, despite all appearances to the contrary.) Here is a set of issues that will keep on recurring in the following chapters – and necessarily so, given that one of my main claims, as already announced, is precisely that Plato remains throughout essentially a *Socratic*. The idea of the soul as unitary

and unconflicted is one of the very marks of the Socratic; if Plato simply decided to set it to one side, that might well be thought enough to put Plato's Socratic credentials in serious jeopardy.

However what I shall claim, and hope to establish, is not only that Plato sees himself, throughout, as a genuine follower of Socrates, but that this view of himself is justified. The usual – 'sceptical' – view is that he both leaves Socrates behind (at some point after the 'Socratic' dialogues) and understands himself as doing so. Thus, according to this more usual kind of approach, there will be a fundamental difference between the earlier Socrates (the Socrates of the 'Socratic' dialogues) and the later one (in the *Republic* and elsewhere); in a more sophisticated version of the same approach, Socrates will be found, in the post-'Socratic' dialogues, saying things whose full import he – unlike the intelligent reader – does not fully understand.⁵² My own alternative approach will propose to do entirely without this kind of distancing between Plato and Socrates. Plato *is* Socrates, except, unavoidably, to the extent that Plato as author is also Socrates' creator and manipulator (manipulating him, that is, in a series of moves that he claims ultimately, and, I claim, reasonably, to have derived from *him*). Indeed Plato is Socrates even when he has the latter cede his place as main speaker to someone else. In the *Timaeus*, Timaeus' reservations about the status of central aspects of his account of the cosmos are Plato's – and also Socrates'.⁵³ The young Socrates whose ideas about forms⁵⁴ are criticized by the great Parmenides in the *Parmenides* is meant to be read, not just as an imagined, or possible,⁵⁵ immature Plato, but also *as Socrates*: the two march together. And the magisterial demonstrations of the method of 'collection and division' by Parmenides' fellow Eleatic in the *Sophist* and *Politicus* are as little in Plato's style as they are Socrates'.⁵⁶ Similarly with the *Laws*, the

⁵² See especially Sedley 2004 on the *Theaetetus*, treated as Plato's acknowledgement of his debt to Socrates (his 'midwife'). It is not clear to me how this general approach will handle what I have been treating as the central problem case, that of the *Republic*, where it seems that 'Socrates' can scarcely be unaware of the distinctly un-Socratic nature of large parts of what Plato puts in his mouth. However for Sedley it is the *metaphysical* aspect of the *Republic* that particularly takes this dialogue beyond Socrates; and it is at least true that Socrates embarks on the main metaphysical section of the dialogue only with the greatest show of reluctance. (Yet: in the *Parmenides* a younger version of the same Socrates is to be found defending 'Platonic' metaphysics.)

⁵³ Compare (or: I shall compare) Socrates' claim in the *Apology* and elsewhere not to have concerned himself with inquiring into the physical world.

⁵⁴ On Platonic 'forms' see initially section 10 below.

⁵⁵ That is, insofar as the ideas criticized are ideas that Plato might have had, or ideas that someone might have had about Plato's ideas.

⁵⁶ This is not of course to deny that Parmenides in *Parmenides*, and his *alter ego*, the Visitor from Elea (Parmenides' home city) in *Sophist* and *Politicus*, are also Plato, to the extent that their starting-points are entirely ones that Plato would himself warmly endorse. Indeed they portray the very

only dialogue among them all in which Socrates is neither present nor even mentioned. The main speaker – a visitor to Crete from Athens – delivers himself on the subject of legislation and associated matters as Socrates did in the *Republic*, but without any of his hesitation and indeed almost with a show of authority, at least in relation to his two interlocutors (one of whom actually connects him directly with Athena, goddess of wisdom: 626D). In short, my thesis is that Plato is to be thought of as presenting himself as well as Socrates as a know-nothing.⁵⁷

5 THE SOCRATES OF THE ‘SOCRATIC’ DIALOGUES, EVEN
WHILE CLAIMING TO KNOW NOTHING, POSSESSES
A SUBSTANTIVE PHILOSOPHICAL POSITION AND
A DISTINCTIVE SET OF PHILOSOPHICAL
STARTING-POINTS

What underpins this claim of mine about the identity between Plato and Socrates is a particular view of the so-called ‘Socratic’ dialogues (and so more generally of this person *Socrates* with whom I am claiming Plato identifies himself). A proper and fuller demonstration of the usefulness of this view of ‘Socrates’ will need to wait until the main part of this book, but the essential points may be stated here. I have already given a rough indication of how the ‘sceptical’ and the ‘doctrinal’ interpreters respectively tend to see the dialogues in question (the ‘Socratic’ ones): in the one case, as (more or less) open-ended explorations, and in the other as a kind

essence of the Platonic philosopher – but with the crucial exception of their *magisterial* stance. Plato in these cases imagines what it would be like for the philosopher to possess at least something of that authority which his Socrates, and (implicitly) he himself, go on disavowing. (These will be the *koruphaioi*, the ‘leaders’ in philosophy, that Socrates refers to in the *Theaetetus* ‘digression’: see chapter 7 below.) Examples: at *Phaedrus* 266B Socrates says he would follow someone with expertise in the method of ‘collection and division’ ‘as if in the footsteps of a god’: and just such an expert appears, in the shape of the Eleatic Visitor, in *Sophist* and *Politicus*, to be greeted by Socrates as ‘some kind of god’ (*Sophist* 216A5, with reference to Homer). Parmenides himself, in his poem, claimed direct inspiration from above: his authority, for the purposes of the fiction, is already given. But any authority that even he has will turn out to be flawed. Again see chapter 7 below.

⁵⁷ For a long time I had thought of the Athenian visitor in the *Laus* as a thinly disguised Plato, because of a remark he makes at the very end about his qualifications as a legislator (‘I’ve had a lot of experience in relation to such things, and thought about them a lot’: XII, 968A8–9); Malcolm Schofield disabused me of the idea, pointing out that in terms of tone the Athenian is actually much more like the Visitor from Elea in *Sophist* and *Politicus*. The kinds of things he says are not so different from – and in many respects need to be read in the context of – what Socrates has to say about politics and political arrangements in the *Republic*, but unlike Socrates he appears to have few doubts about his fitness for saying them. At the same time he does not claim anything approaching infallibility: he envisages the laws he and his two interlocutors are putting together for the new city of Magnesia as still capable of improvement.

of preparatory exercise, to rid us of false views, or of a false pretence to knowledge. I propose that both of these sorts of readings, while containing elements of the truth, are ultimately mistaken.⁵⁸ There is little or nothing that is genuinely open-ended about the 'Socratic' dialogues, and little that is genuinely exploratory either⁵⁹ – or at least from the standpoint of the author and his chief character. It is not just that Plato and Socrates are both ahead of the interlocutor; that is, it is not just a matter of control.⁶⁰ The essential point is rather that Plato's Socrates *always has a positive, and substantive, agenda*.⁶¹ He addresses his interlocutors from a particular, and philosophically formed, point of view – one which will almost always be fundamentally different from theirs, and to which it is evidently his purpose to try to bring them over; just as, I presume, it is Plato's purpose to try to bring his readers, us, over (except, of course, to whatever extent we may already be with him). This is clearly essential to my thesis: on any account *Plato* had a 'substantive agenda' (however that may be specified); if Socrates had none, it would be nonsensical to suggest that Plato identified with him as completely as I wish to claim.

The 'doctrinal' sort of interpreters will have no problems with the suggestion that Socrates – for the moment, the Socrates of the 'Socratic' dialogues – had a substantive agenda; after all, their Socrates is permanently in full possession of the same truths all along, to which *Republic* and other post-'Socratic' dialogues give us whatever access we may be allowed. That of course is not at all the sort of agenda that I have in mind. However the fact that the 'doctrinalists' can claim that their favoured agenda is there at all, under the surface, begins to indicate the size of the problem that my own claim has apparently to face. To all appearances, the Socrates of dialogues

⁵⁸ The second reading might appear to receive direct support from a passage like *Sophist* 230B–D: but that passage itself gives only a one-sided picture of the dialectical process – one that concentrates on the preparatory and the negative, and leaves out the possibility of progress beyond 'cleansing' from false beliefs (because of an immediate contrast with sophistical refutations).

⁵⁹ This is not to deny that there is an element of exploration, and an important one, in the Platonic dialogues as a whole (see especially chapter 8, pp. 237–8 below). My point here is strictly about the 'Socratic' dialogues, which are often thought to be quintessentially exploratory: that, I claim, is an illusion – except to the extent that we may be able to think away the actual results of the conversation, and the actual signs of the author's intentions in terms of substantive content. See below.

⁶⁰ Plato, of course, can always see where the argument will go, since he is making it go there: at least fictionally Socrates will have rather less control, since he won't know quite how the interlocutor will behave. This is where the 'sceptical' reading will acquire some purchase on things, as it will in a more general way to the extent that Socrates' exchanges with his interlocutors illustrate what a philosophical conversation looks like.

⁶¹ An agenda, that is, which is still compatible with Socrates' (and Plato's) position as know-nothing. The conditions Plato ultimately sets on the possession of knowledge, i.e. full knowledge or wisdom about the things that matter, are very high indeed (see chapter 7 below).

like *Euthyphro* and *Laches* (which one might think of as archetypal 'Socratic' dialogues) really does seem to have very few positive ideas to push. Leave aside the claims of the 'doctrinalists' about a hidden agenda, and the field at once appears to belong to the 'sceptics'. First, there is that repeated claim of Socrates' that he knows nothing. If he knows nothing, then surely that ought to imply that he has nothing much to bring his interlocutors over *to*, apart perhaps from a few earnestly held beliefs. Those he surely has in any case – about the importance of philosophy, and of virtue. Beyond general claims of that kind, or so interpreters of a 'sceptical' ilk will urge, he really ought to be committed to exploring things with us, not trying to sell us any goods whose value, as a know-nothing, he is in no position to vouch for. Secondly, the 'sceptics' will ask, if Socrates has a positive philosophical agenda to put forward in these dialogues, why is it that so many of them end in *impasse* (*aporia*, a state in which one does not know what do next, where to go next)? Again, doesn't Socrates typically put his questions in an open-ended way – 'what is courage/piety/justice/beauty?'

Part of what underlies such objections is an often unspoken assumption among such interpreters that by and large Plato will observe what we think of as philosophical propriety, and not smuggle in substantive premisses that have not been acknowledged by both interlocutors. It might be fair enough – they will quietly suppose – to use short-cuts on occasion, but it would be nothing short of a professional foul (to use a different metaphor, this time a footballing one) on Plato's part to have Socrates rely on assumptions to which we, and the interlocutor(s), have not been given access. So, the argument will run, what you see is what you get; Socrates has no substantive philosophical agenda, and my claim must be false.

I begin with this last and in many ways most important objection, based on what might be called the rules of the game. My first response is to repeat a point I made above: written dialogue (in Plato's case) is not the same thing as, and does not follow the rules of, ordinary live philosophical dialectic. Of course in any ideal philosophical conversation both parties would have to put everything on the table in order to make any genuine advance together. But as author and controller of written dialogue, Plato has a freer hand, and his focus is – I suppose – on *our*, the readers', improvement, rather than that of Socrates' interlocutor. My proposal is that, in the 'Socratic' dialogues, Plato has Socrates examine his interlocutors' views (or those they can be induced to take on and defend) against the backdrop of his own rival views, which may not surface fully and explicitly but which will turn out nevertheless – if and when we have recognized them for what they are – to have had an influence on the course of the argument and its outcomes,

and indeed on the very choice of subject for the conversation in the first place.⁶² This strategy is intelligible, if – as I suppose – (a) Plato tends to think Socrates' starting-points true,⁶³ and (b) he is aware of how unfamiliar, if not plain implausible, they will seem to most people (a point to which I shall return shortly). So unfamiliar, in fact, as to make any conversation impossible, except perhaps about the implausibility of Socrates' positions – when Plato's real focus, and target, is actually the positions Socrates is attacking.

As to how we recognize what Socrates' starting-points are, my answer is that we shall need – and are intended – to read across from one dialogue to another: from dialogues that are relatively explicit about Socrates' own philosophical perspective, especially *Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Euthydemus*, *Gorgias*, to others that are less explicit, like *Ion*, *Laches*, *Euthyphro*.⁶⁴ Like others, I believe that we must always begin by trying to understand a dialogue by itself, since almost all of them are presented, fictionally and dramatically, as being or including self-standing conversations. But it is an essential part of the kind of interpretation that I am proposing, and will argue for in the following chapters, that ultimately the full import of any dialogue will not be capable of being grasped without cross-reference to others. This is much more than the general, and plausible, claim that we should be able to deepen our understanding of any philosopher's position by reading his or her works in their totality. My claim is rather that Plato sets things up in such a way that we *have* to read across from one dialogue to another: not just because he wants us to put things together for ourselves, although he will hardly have been averse to such an outcome, but because it is a condition of getting conversations started in the first place – given where he is starting from – that everything is not laid on the interlocutor, and the reader, at once.⁶⁵

⁶² Thus the reason why so many 'Socratic' dialogues, as well as the *Theaetetus*, start from the question 'what is . . . ?' is not just that Socrates has an obsession with finding definitions (though he, and Plato, may very well have had that anyway). It is also, and especially, because he has a particular view of the *definiendum* that he wishes to advocate in place of the one(s) sponsored by Socrates' interlocutors.

⁶³ And so real starting-points. I shall attempt to sketch these in the next section.

⁶⁴ It is undoubtedly part of Plato's purpose to make us put things together for ourselves: we have to work hard even when things are done more directly. However this is not the main reason why he works in such a piecemeal way. That is, again (see preceding paragraph), something that is forced on him in any case if he is to get conversations off the ground at all.

⁶⁵ It will now be clear how important it is to my case to identify what I called the 'persuasive' function of Plato's writing – and also its ambitions in terms of audience. He could have written treatises, to be read by specialists; instead he writes dialogues, most of which look safe enough for anyone to enter (but which then tend to bite back).

If modern interpreters, particularly those of an analytical bent, have tended to downplay the contribution to the 'Socratic' dialogues of a distinctive, and substantive, Socratic position,⁶⁶ that is partly because – in my view – that position has been widely misinterpreted, and then written off as naive, merely optimistic, or otherwise inadequate and limited, and partly also because of a tendency to approach the 'Socratic' dialogues first and foremost in terms of their outward and formal characteristics. Thus these dialogues are described as 'aporetic'; they are typically 'dialogues of definition'; and they are also typically 'elenctic', consisting essentially in the refutation by Socrates of his interlocutors. The first two of these descriptions⁶⁷ are the source of the second and third of those imagined objections to my claim that, in the 'Socratic' dialogues, Plato's Socrates already possesses a positive and systematic philosophical agenda. Why, if that is so, does Plato then set things up in so apparently open-ended a way ('what is *x*?'), and why have the discussion so often end in *aporia*? To the first question, the reply is that Socrates never asks the question 'what is *x*?' without already knowing what he thinks the answer should be:⁶⁸ if *x* is any of the virtues, that answer will always be the same – 'knowledge of good and bad' (that is, good for the agent, bad for the agent: see further section 6 below). The conversation will be *presented*, to the interlocutor, as an exploration, but in fact it will explore little except the weaknesses of whatever it is Socrates' interlocutor comes up with, or whatever Socrates comes up with for him. There is never any genuine chance that the discussion will be allowed to end anywhere except where Socrates intends; not just because of Plato's foreknowledge as author, but because the author is colluding with his main speaker and allowing him to operate within the bounds of a particular, and predetermined, set of ideas. And equally, there are no genuine cases of *impasse*, or *aporia*: Socrates, that is, is never genuinely at a loss, or at a loss in the way he suggests.⁶⁹ The *impasse* – I propose – is always apparent

⁶⁶ Thus e.g., for Sedley (2004: 9) the Socrates of the 'Socratic' dialogues is 'an open-minded critic and enquirer', albeit one who at the same time 'defend[s] substantive moral theses of his own' (p. 1), and who possesses a considerable list of 'skills and insights' (listed at Sedley 2004: 34–5) – at least according to Plato's account of the matter. (Sedley is here reconstructing Plato's view of Socrates' 'principles of midwifery' from the *Theaetetus* – 'but if it is Plato's retrospective interpretation of his own portrayal of Socrates, it deserves to be treated with the utmost respect', 35.) My own list of the insights of Plato's Socrates will, naturally, be rather more 'considerable', even in relation to the 'Socratic' dialogues.

⁶⁷ I have already criticized the third: see text to n. 16 above. ⁶⁸ See already n. 62 above.

⁶⁹ The qualification is necessary, and important, because there may well be *other* ways in which Socrates and his author might be in *aporia*. They know the way out of the *impasse* as stated, as the interlocutor doesn't; but as know-nothings they won't claim to have any complete and final answers available. See below.

only, deriving from the shortcomings of the interlocutor or of the direction of the argument, or both; reconfigure the argument and/or change the interlocutor or the way he thinks, and *impasse* can be avoided.

Why does Plato write in this way? I have already indicated my answer. It is not because he enjoys putting on a kind of intellectual striptease,⁷⁰ or even, again, because he wants us to do the work (although he does want that). It is rather because he knows *he* has a lot of work to do. The truth cannot be given us on a plate, directly: that is one of the main points of the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*. We have to see things for ourselves. But this is more than just a sound educational principle: seeing the way things are involves, as it may be, having to give up the way we currently see them. A long process of persuasion is involved, of gentle, perhaps – within the 'Socratic' dialogues themselves – progressive, exposure, combined with questioning of our own (Socrates' interlocutors') ideas. (The idea of these dialogues as 'cleansing', then, gives only one half of the picture: Socrates is already putting forward the ideas he wants to replace the ones he is cleaning out.)

That is one, strategic, reason why Plato is always so careful to avoid representing Socrates as the expert, namely because it isn't just a matter of passing things over, rather of getting people to *see*. But there is a more fundamental reason for Socrates' stance, which simultaneously makes it more than a mere stance. The set of ideas, truths, that Plato and his Socrates want to persuade us to accept is no more than a beginning; it provides us with a framework for thinking, and for acting, without actually telling us what we should do here and now. What we need, we are told, is a certain kind of knowledge, a certain expertise or science; but Socrates himself does not have it, even if he has some considerable insights into its subject-matter.

6 WHAT IS THIS 'SUBSTANTIVE PHILOSOPHICAL POSITION' OF SOCRATES', AND WHAT ARE THESE 'DISTINCTIVE PHILOSOPHICAL STARTING-POINTS'?

I have already briefly referred (in section 4 above) to one essential part of what I claim to be the Socratic position. This is his idea that we human beings always, and only, desire what is truly good for us. We cannot, psychologically, desire what is actually bad for us; it is desire for our good that drives us in everything – desire for our *real* good, that is, not merely what appears good. Excellence or virtue is a good thing; if so, then it too

⁷⁰ I owe this phrasing immediately to Simon Blackburn.

must be a matter of what is good and bad for us. (So, virtue, excellence, is knowledge – of good and bad; and all virtue⁷¹ is one.) If something we think we desire turns out not to be a good thing, then we don't desire it. So, if we go after something that is in fact bad, and desire for good is what always drives us, it must be our understanding, our beliefs, that are at fault; we don't properly understand what is good and bad for us. In other words, we only go wrong through ignorance. No one goes wrong willingly (how could they?).

What we have here is a strict brand of psychological egoism.⁷² But the connection with the virtues (which will include justice and courage) already suggests that this is a rather special brand of egoism, one that allows in the kinds of behaviour which on other accounts will be 'for the sake of others'. Even love and friendship, Socrates thinks, will be traceable back to our desire for our *own* good. Our love for our children, our husbands or wives, our teachers: all are ultimately explicable in terms of that same desire, insofar as – it seems – our children, our spouses, our teachers are all bound up with our own good, or happiness. He will be not the slightest bit disturbed by the accusation that this reduces others to mere instrumental means to our own well-being, not least because he refuses to separate means from end: if we desire an end, then we will also desire the means to it, insofar as we cannot have the one without the other. Granted, that entails that the desire for the means (our children, our wife, as it may be) will be derivative from, conditional on, our desire for our good (our happiness), but then is it so bad for them to be loved by us because they make us happy – that is, because they and their happiness form part of our real good, and on condition that our loving them will involve our doing everything we can to promote *their* real good?⁷³

To many, of course, the answer will still be yes (it will be 'so bad'). Add to that the suggestion, incredible to most moderns, that we never go wrong because of our desires – or, to put it in a more familiar form, that there is no such thing as 'lack of self-control' (because what we *call* that is actually a matter of intellectual error) – and one begins to see just how far out on a limb Socrates really is. Nor is that the end of it: just as he thinks that our desire is aligned with things that we may never even have had in our minds,

⁷¹ I should prefer to use 'excellence' exclusively for the Greek term *aretē*, in preference to 'virtue'; in this kind of context, however, 'virtue' is too deeply embedded to be easily dispensed with.

⁷² Absent from Plato generally, I shall claim, is any kind of *moral* good: see especially chapters 1, 4 and 9 below.

⁷³ The preceding sentences on desire and love represent the briefest of summaries of some of what I claim is to be derived, whether directly or indirectly, from the *Lysis*. See below.

so he also proposes that when we go wrong intellectually, what we really wanted to get hold of was what we actually missed. So what we wanted to be thinking about was, again, something that we never even thought of. But that follows from the claim about desire: if we wanted some particular action other than the action we did (because the first would in fact have been best, while the second turned out to be bad for us), then we wanted that other action to appear best to us, even if it in fact never entered our heads that it was even an option.⁷⁴

How then are we to achieve that real good that we want? Socrates thinks we need a special kind of expertise: expertise about the good, which will enable us to distinguish it from the bad, and from what is neither good nor bad – a large category, which turns out to include a high proportion of the very things that people normally think of as good (not just money, power, and other obvious things like that, but even health itself: according to Socrates, there will be occasions on which we shall be better off dead, and terminal illness or a fatal accident will be a blessing). Talk of this expertise, or 'art', or 'science' (*technē*), is ubiquitous in the 'Socratic' dialogues. It is, he proposes, an art or science that is in all respects but one like others. Like them it will have its own subject-matter (the good, taken universally, which will then need to be applied to particular cases), its own separate aim, its own separate procedures. The one difference, and it is a crucial one, between this art or science and other arts and sciences is that while they can be misused by those who choose to practise them, the art and science of the good cannot be so misused. For *no one* acts contrary to what he believes or knows is his own good. In addition Socrates holds that it will never be the part of a good man – someone who possesses the art and science of the good – to harm anyone else.

These, I propose, are Socrates' starting-points in – what others call – the 'Socratic' dialogues,⁷⁵ together with one further work that is generally treated as post-'Socratic': the *Symposium*;⁷⁶ and, strikingly, the first book of

⁷⁴ To be clear: this is not some *sub-conscious*, or mysteriously 'second-order', desire: it is just that what we all of us want on any occasion is not what appears good for us, but what is really good. See under 'Principle of Real Reference' in the index to Penner and Rowe 2005, and, for the handiest passage in Plato, *Republic* vi, 505d.

⁷⁵ For the purposes of the argument, the 'Socratic' dialogues will be a baker's dozen: *Apology* (not strictly a dialogue, but no matter), *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Meno*, *Menexenus*, *Protagoras*. (If some wish to quibble about the list, introducing sub-categories, or giving one or other item a later date, I shall not mind: all, I claim, clearly buy in – are best explained as buying in – to the set of ideas described in the preceding paragraphs.)

⁷⁶ For the *Symposium* as containing the same theory of action as its close relation, the *Lysis*, see Rowe 2006b.

that (allegedly) quintessentially post-‘Socratic’ dialogue, the *Republic*.⁷⁷ The connected set of ideas described is the one that I claim (a) is demonstrably required for the interpretation of one of that list of ‘Socratic’ dialogues, the *Lysis*, and (b) provides the best means to the understanding of the rest.⁷⁸ As evidence for (a) I offer Penner and Rowe 2005, a painstaking investigation of the *Lysis* which it would be superfluous to reproduce, even in miniature, here, but whose outcomes⁷⁹ appear to me secure until a rival and equally detailed interpretation of that tiny piece – a mere ten thousand or so words in English translation – becomes available. *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* is to that extent, as it was always intended to be, a sequel to Penner and Rowe 2005.⁸⁰ As for claim (b), I shall leave that to establish itself in the course of the following chapters.⁸¹ The evidence offered along the way will be far short of complete. However the chief aim of the book is to propose, and argue for, a way of understanding Plato, not to try to achieve closure in the discussion of an author whom my own account will represent as one of the most elusive.

7 THE REVOLUTIONARY NATURE OF THIS PERSPECTIVE, AND THE CONSEQUENCES FOR PLATO’S STRATEGIES AS A WRITER⁸²

If what I have just sketchily described accurately portrays at least a part of what Socrates wanted to say, one thing will be perfectly clear: Socrates’

⁷⁷ I provide evidence for this claim in chapter 5 below, with Appendix.

⁷⁸ In fact many of its central aspects are not particularly controversial; at any rate there are others who, if asked to come up with a thumbnail sketch of ‘Socrates’ ideas, would produce something not unlike the above. See e.g., Taylor 2000: 62–3.

⁷⁹ Only roughly, and incompletely, outlined above: my aim at this point is merely to provide a sketch, to be filled out in the course of direct encounters with Plato’s text in later chapters.

⁸⁰ Others may be, and evidently often are, content with a looser, more impressionistic kind of reading of Plato than the one offered in that volume (or else unconnected, painstaking analysis of individual dialogues in isolation from others). I, in common with Penner, insist that Plato’s Socrates is a highly sophisticated philosopher who always thinks in a *connected* way, and that it is our business as readers and interpreters to dig out the connections. There is more to him than the scary but evidently benign fellow with a few paradoxes and a gift for exposing ignorance that some readings of the ‘Socratic’ dialogues make him. (Would Plato spend *thirteen* dialogues, half of the total, recommending such a person, before branching out on his own – as some suppose? Maybe.)

⁸¹ See especially chapters 1–5, and chapter 9.

⁸² To sum up the broad contrast between my interpretation and that of the ‘sceptics’: a typical ‘sceptical’ view of the ‘Socratic’ dialogues is that they represent work in progress. They are a direct reflection of Plato’s thinking in his ‘Socratic’ period, perhaps genuinely Socratic in shape, exploratory, unsystematic, raising questions rather than providing answers; it is left to the mature Plato to complete the Socratic project, if only by radically transforming it. On the account I am proposing, the thinking behind the ‘Socratic’ dialogues is already connected, constituting a coherent nexus of ideas if not a system; what then comes after and is labelled ‘Platonism’ is that nexus of ideas, but further articulated, tweaked, expanded.

position is, from a modern point of view, distinctly peculiar. No wonder, one might say, that interpreters – the ‘sceptical’ sort – have wanted to see Plato leaving Socrates behind. (As a matter of fact not many of them have seen just *how* peculiar Socrates really was.⁸³ But the point still holds.) And it would have been just as peculiar from a fourth-century Athenian perspective, for many of the same reasons. Technical philosophical objections will not have concerned most of Socrates’ or Plato’s contemporaries overmuch, but what Socrates had to say about goods, about virtue, and about desire would probably have seemed as odd to them as it does to most of us. If they could conceivably be talked into entertaining the notion that money, reputation or power were not goods in themselves, they would surely have balked at the notion that *health*, or *life*, were not. Again, they would probably have been resistant to, or at least baffled by, the proposal to reduce the virtues to a kind of knowledge of good and bad. (The noble and the admirable – the closest the Greek context comes to our category of the ‘moral’ good – play a large role in political, rhetorical and social contexts.⁸⁴) And they would surely have greeted Socrates’ denial of the possibility of what we have come to call ‘weakness of will’, *akrasia* (loss of self-control, acting contrary to reason under the influence of passion), with sheer incredulity.

But in the ‘Socratic’ dialogues – or more generally in what I take to be the pre-*Republic* dialogues (a formulation I shall now generally prefer, and will shortly justify) – this is, for all we can tell, Plato’s own position; for, in these dialogues, he is alternately stating, arguing for, and so, apparently, advocating it. Quite where we find Plato at the end of his career, and how much of the Socratic agenda by then still genuinely remains intact,⁸⁵ will be one of the central questions that will be addressed in successive parts of the present book. But I have already⁸⁶ given notice of the general conclusion for which I shall argue, namely that Plato always ‘remained essentially a Socratic’⁸⁷ – which means, among other things, that he remains at least as far removed as Socrates ever did from ordinary perceptions and perspectives.

Understanding that distance between Plato and his intended audience, and between Plato and ourselves, is an essential part of understanding how to read his dialogues. Interpreters have on the whole either ignored or underestimated this aspect of Plato, preferring to try to treat Platonic

⁸³ That is, because so many fail to see him as having any sort of theory, just a few paradoxes . . . For those who do see Socrates as having a theory, the theory in question may actually be even more peculiar than the one I have attributed to him: for limited references, see chapter 4, n. 25 below.

⁸⁴ See chapter 4 below, on the *Gorgias*, esp. section 2 (c).

⁸⁵ Not to exclude the question of what Plato adds to that agenda: not just a large political element, but (for example) a large-scale account of the physical world.

⁸⁶ See section 3 above. ⁸⁷ This is, again, far from being the ordinary view.

dialogues as if they were open like other texts, or as if reading them were like listening to conversations between people – Socrates/Plato and their immediate audiences – who are basically like ourselves. But one of the partners to the conversations in question, namely Socrates, and his author, are *not* like us, and were not like their immediate audience, whether Socrates' in the dialogues, or Plato's as author; we, generally speaking, are more like his audience than we are like Plato, or his Socrates. (One of the epithets Socrates' friends and associates attach to him in the dialogues is 'odd', 'strange' – *atopos*, literally 'out of place', 'outlandish'.) So different is the Platonic/Socratic view of things that in some respects they might almost be said not to speak the same language as their contemporaries. 'Good', 'bad', 'beneficial', 'harmful', 'admirable', 'shameful': these and other terms (e.g., 'art'/'science', 'knowledge', 'ignorance', 'desire', even 'pleasure') Plato and his Socrates apply in such different ways from the ways in which they are applied in ordinary language and ordinary contexts and conversations that on the face of it even beginning a conversation that involves such terms ought to be difficult. Even more so, when Plato and Socrates think that other people apply them *wrongly*. (Other people feel the same about Socrates, with the difference that they simply assume that the way they apply the terms in question is right, whereas he has a reasoned account of why they're wrong.) This mismatch between the speakers in a dialogue⁸⁸ also exists between Socrates and the reader, and it is a matter of common, perhaps universal, experience that reading Plato's dialogues is difficult.⁸⁹ The main reason for that, I propose, or one of the main reasons, is that Socrates and we, like Socrates and his interlocutors, will frequently be at cross-purposes. He just doesn't behave in the way we expect him to behave. And that is because what he says tends to be freighted with baggage the true extent and value of which he will usually not have declared to us (any more than we will have declared our assumptions, perhaps taking these to be inevitable).

That, though, may be a misleading way of putting it, since it might suggest that Plato is deliberately withholding information from us: an unlikely seeming tactic for someone whose main aim is, as I think, to persuade.⁹⁰ It

⁸⁸ I refer here to the generality of the dialogues; what I am looking for first is a broad *type* of explanation of Plato's way of writing, after which one can begin to qualify the explanation and identify exceptions.

⁸⁹ He is 'weird' (see section 1 above) – odd, like his Socrates?

⁹⁰ For members of the 'Tübingen school' (see n. 8 above), 'withholding' or 'holding back' is an essential part of Plato's writing strategy because the reader needs to be prepared for the more important truths, which in any case cannot be conveyed in writing.

seems preferable to think, as I suggested earlier,⁹¹ in terms of a progressive – or, better, cumulative? – introduction to the various parts of Socratic thinking, from dialogue to dialogue, in the context of his examination of others usually as unfamiliar with that thinking as we may be. Plato feeds us that in bits and pieces not only because – he supposes, with good reason – he has a long way to go to bring readers round, but because at the same time he has to introduce us to philosophical ways of thinking (the habit of dialogue).⁹²

This introduces an important point of difference between reader and interlocutor. Some interlocutors are portrayed as having heard Socrates before, which might give them the same kind of advantage as readers who have read other Platonic dialogues. But by and large the unfortunate interlocutor will only have whatever Socrates offers him in the course of the immediate conversation. The consequence is that he will typically be at sea, to varying degrees, in a way that the reader in principle need not be. The dialogues generally exhibit at least two levels of understanding, Socrates' and that of the interlocutor,⁹³ and the reader is in effect invited to ask himself or herself whether to side with the one or with the other.⁹⁴ Quite often there will be different ways of reading the same argument, depending on whether one is starting from Socrates' premisses or more ordinary ones;⁹⁵ these will be the arguments that interpreters, lacking access to Socrates' starting-points, will typically find the weakest. (Or else – I earlier cited some examples from the *Republic* – Socrates will adopt starting-points from his interlocutors, but, as I claimed, without ever finally depending on them.) But more usually the argument will move in ways that are simply baffling until we have worked out the preoccupations, and the general line of thinking, that motivate them.

In the context of these observations, the dialogue form appears perfectly adapted to Plato's purposes, allowing him to use the play between the

⁹¹ See section 5 above.

⁹² Here is another respect in which Plato is wholly with Socrates: neither can straightforwardly *teach* anybody anything (cf., e.g., *Theaetetus* 150b).

⁹³ I am assuming here the kind of identification between the author, Plato, and his character Socrates for which I argued earlier (leaving aside the necessary difference that the character will always know less about what is *going* to happen, or why he is where he is, than his author).

⁹⁴ The most extravagant set of levels, or layers, of understanding is probably to be found in the *Lysis*: Lysis himself comes closest to Socrates' level, then Menexenus; then there are the bystanders, and finally poor Hippothales, who has clearly not understood a word of what has been said – and the drunken slaves who insist on taking Lysis and Menexenus home to their parents, at the end of the dialogue. See Penner and Rowe 2005.

⁹⁵ See especially chapter 4 and Appendix to chapter 5 below (on *Gorgias* and *Republic* 1 respectively).

interlocutors to mediate between him and his readers.⁹⁶ On this interpretation, there will be very little that is in the proper sense *dialogical* about Plato's dialogues (with that one exception, that dialectical exchanges within them may serve as static models for the real thing, i.e. live dialectic, and might even accurately portray examples of it; but that is a different matter).⁹⁷ However that is a fully intended part of the interpretation I am proposing. Even the 'Socratic' dialogues contain 'doctrines', if one cares to call them by that name, of the value of which Plato means to try to persuade us. Nor is this merely a matter of a few 'substantive moral theses',⁹⁸ but rather of what I have called a nexus of ideas⁹⁹ – one that I hope to show to be fit to provide what one might call the infrastructure of Platonism itself.

8 THE PROPOSED INTERPRETATION OF PLATO'S USE OF DIALOGUE FORM COMPARED WITH TWO OTHER INTERPRETATIONS

It may at this point be useful to take stock, by way of a brief comparison between the kind of interpretation I have been proposing of Plato's use of dialogue with two rival interpretations.

The first of these, which has gained in favour in recent years, is that Plato wrote dialogues as a way of avoiding the appearance of dictating to his readers,¹⁰⁰ in a way that might appear to absolve them of the hard work that goes with any sort of philosophical enterprise. This might be thought of as the archetypal 'sceptical' interpretation of the use of dialogue form; but it also finds favour among more literary interpreters, not least those who like to think of texts as inherently polyphonous. To this form of interpretation I now find myself totally opposed. While Plato may on occasion want to distance himself from his main speaker, this will be – I

⁹⁶ A partly separate account, then, will be needed for a (virtual) monologue like the *Timaeus*. However I have already indicated something about how that account will run (in such cases Socrates and Plato themselves become auditors/readers).

⁹⁷ As a consequence, I have found little that is useful in modern discussions of dialogue for the purposes of understanding Plato.

⁹⁸ See n. 66 above.

⁹⁹ One that is not explicitly articulated as such a nexus; but a distinction is presumably to be drawn between what is articulated to us, or is capable of being so articulated through the medium of independent dialogues/conversations, and what the author and his main character have in fact articulated to and for themselves (and mean us to put together for ourselves). The question how we decide what that is, given that it is not in fact presented as a systematic whole, I regard as rather less than pressing; if a philosophical story can be told that will explain the phenomena of the written dialogues, it will be wasteful and not merely uncharitable to refuse to tell it.

¹⁰⁰ E.g., 'Originally, Socrates used the form of the dialogue to test and to expose presumed authority without having himself to adopt a position of authority', etc. (Frede 2000: 151–2).

propose – only when the main speaker is not Socrates. The core of Plato's enterprise is, from beginning to end, the advocacy of positive ideas, even if, paradoxically, he chooses to advocate them for the most part through a know-nothing.¹⁰¹ It will then only be in a formal sense that Plato is absent. If the question is why he does not appear in person in his own dialogues, the answer is that he is already ubiquitous and controlling;¹⁰² if the question is why he wrote dialogues (and then did not include himself in the *dramatis personae*), there are more satisfying answers available.

One of these is the second alternative type of interpretation I pick out for comparison with my own. I have previously mentioned this way of understanding Plato's use of dialogue form in passing:¹⁰³

Plato's real reason¹⁰⁴ for persisting with the dialogue form is, I think . . . his growing belief – more than once made explicit in his later work [at *Theaetetus* 189E–190A, *Sophist* 263E–264B, *Philebus* 38C–E] – that conversation, in the form of question and answer, is the structure of thought itself. When we think, what we are doing is precisely to ask and answer questions internally, and our judgements are the outcome of that same process. Hence it seems that what Plato dramatises as external conversations can be internalised by us, the readers, as setting the model for our own processes of philosophical reasoning. More important still is the converse, that these same question-and-answer sequences can legitimately be read by us as *Plato thinking aloud*. And that, I suggest, is in the last analysis how Plato maintains the dominating and inescapable presence in his own dialogues that few if any mere dramatists can rival. They are an externalisation of his own thought processes. Plato's very word for philosophical method, 'dialectic', means quite literally the science of conducting a conversation in this question-and-answer form, and it is vital to appreciate that the inter-personal discussion portrayed in the dialogues is not the only mode in which such discussion can occur; internal discussion is another, and perhaps even more fundamental, mode.¹⁰⁵

I have indicated at length, in section 3 above, the sorts of reasons that lead me to reject this type of explanation for Plato's using, or 'persisting with',¹⁰⁶ the

¹⁰¹ A solution to the paradox will emerge in the following chapters.

¹⁰² One might also ask: if Plato wanted to avoid the appearance of speaking *ex cathedra*, he made a strange decision when he made *Socrates* his protagonist – perhaps the best-known intellectual figure of his time, who single-handedly spawned more philosophical schools or *haireseis* (some of them emerging, or already emerged, during Plato's lifetime) than practically anyone in the western world before or since.

¹⁰³ See n. 39 above.

¹⁰⁴ The author of the passage is contrasting his interpretation with the type of reading I have just rejected; he refers to Frede 1992, Wardy 1996, Press 2000, Blondell 2002, Cooper 1997 ('a more nuanced version').

¹⁰⁵ Sedley 2003: 1–2.

¹⁰⁶ 'What for [Plato] no doubt started out as the external imitation of Socratic questioning gave way in time to the conviction that Socratic dialogical conversation is philosophy' (Sedley 2003: 2n. 3).

dialogue form: most fundamentally, that it radically understates the extent to which the dialogues are *staged* – by the author, for an audience. The idea that the dialogues show us Plato thinking aloud is not, in my view, anywhere near sufficient to explain the complexities of the artefact that is the Platonic dialogue, with its changes of interlocutors, location, pace, tone and so on (see further section 11 below).

However there is one particular feature, or consequence, of this type of reading of Plato's use of dialogue form that I especially want to resist. If the dialogues are a kind of record of Plato's internal thought processes, then they will apparently be an accurate guide to his thinking at the time of writing, or indeed, if he revised any of his works (which seems *a priori* likely enough), at the time of revision; and they will also accurately track any *changes* in his thinking. *Aporiai*, failed attempts at finding solutions to specific problems, will tend to be Plato's own, and differences between solutions offered in different dialogues will mark the evolution, and as it may be the maturing, of his thinking in a particular area (given, that is, that we have what looks like a reasonably reliable picture of the relative dating of different parts of the corpus: see section 10 below). By this account, Plato is learning as he goes along, or learning on the job: making mistakes, then going on to correct them, gradually becoming a better philosopher (even though we may actually read him out of order, as it were – not in order of composition). Now there is nothing inherently implausible in this picture; and if it is hard to think of any other philosopher whose intellectual progress is quite so transparent to us as Plato's usually turns out to be, on the sort of interpretation in question, perhaps that is just because no one else wrote in the way Plato did ('thinking aloud'). One might even grant that such a reading obeys the principle of charity, insofar as it allows Plato to get things right, or more right, as well as to get them wrong. However I believe that it also runs a serious risk of *underestimating* Plato.

Or, to put a card on the table that I have already partly shown, I believe that seeing the dialogues as a record of Plato's own intellectual tussles¹⁰⁷ actually *does* underestimate him. This it does in two ways. First, it underestimates the degree of artfulness in Plato's writing; and here I include all those features of the dialogues that flow from Plato's awareness of his relationship with his readers, and his purpose in addressing them – that is, broadly, as I have suggested, to *persuade* them to a different point of view. But in the second place (and this is a new and important point), reading the dialogues as giving direct insight into Plato's development tends to make

¹⁰⁷ *Inter alia*, of course.

us underestimate him as a philosopher: not in terms of any final verdict we may pass on him (because, after all, he gets there in the end even on the developmental reading), but rather in the sense that such a reading must lead us to write off, to varying degrees, a large proportion of his output. After all, if he did move on and get better, then his earlier works will apparently be a record of relative failure. These works will be useful, no doubt, for feeding to undergraduates early on in their own philosophical development, and perhaps also insofar as they are¹⁰⁸ examples of philosophical exploration, but ultimately they will be of largely historical interest.

One of the chief drivers of this approach is precisely the sense that Plato had, as it were, to deal with his master – perhaps even to get Socrates out of his system, by writing the ‘Socratic’ dialogues. This is the view that leads to what I earlier described as ‘the single greatest obstacle to a proper understanding of Plato and Platonism’, the division of the Platonic *oeuvre* into a Socratic part, on the one hand, and a truly Platonic part on the other. This division in itself involves another kind of underestimation: the underestimation of *Socrates’* contribution, or at least of whatever it was that Plato thought he had got from Socrates. It is around that contribution, of course, that the present book revolves: remove or devalue it, and the bulk of the argument of the book will disappear in a puff of smoke.¹⁰⁹

For the kind of interpretation with which I am currently contrasting my own,¹¹⁰ the Socrates of the ‘Socratic’ dialogues will have the kind of ‘maieutic’ role Plato has him ascribe to himself at *Theaetetus* 148E–151D: that is, he will serve as a kind of midwife (*maia*) of ideas who helps *others* to ‘give birth’ while being ‘childless’ himself. It is hard to disagree with this claim in some form or another, since the *Theaetetus* passage so plainly picks up Socrates’ self-presentation in the dialogues in question (and indeed in others), as a know-nothing, and at the same time seems so accurately to describe his practice – especially when he talks about how unusual a midwife he is, possessing as he does the ability to tell the true and substantial offspring from their false and counterfeit counterparts.¹¹¹ However everything here depends on how the analogy is to be understood. What Socrates accepts is (1) that he asks other people questions (2) without declaring his own position, (3) because he ‘has nothing wise’ (sc. to declare). If this is intended

¹⁰⁸ I.e. according to the type of interpretation in question.

¹⁰⁹ For grounds for my confidence that it will not thus disappear, see section 6 above. Especially reassuring is the way in which Socrates’ (Plato’s Socrates’) thinking throughout not just the so-called ‘Socratic’ dialogues but all those that are ‘pre-*Republic*’ turns out to fit together. Different parts or aspects of this thinking show up in different places, but they all form part of a satisfying philosophical whole.

¹¹⁰ See Sedley 2004. ¹¹¹ I.e. the ones that are merely images or likenesses (*eidōla*).

as a general claim never to make any assertions, it is clearly falsified by the very sentence in which he makes it.¹¹² It will make better sense to interpret Socrates as saying that he never declares his hand in relation to the sort of question that he has just now put to Theaetetus, so starting off the whole analogy: 'what is this thing knowledge?', which the two of them have evidently been worrying about for some time. And indeed it is typically on questions like that ('what is piety?', 'what is courage?', 'what is *sôphrosunê*?')¹¹³ that Socrates in fact, typically, fails to declare himself in the 'Socratic' dialogues. In other words, when he accepts that he declares himself *about nothing* (*Theaetetus* 150C6), what he is saying is not that he makes no assertions about anything at all, but rather that he makes no assertions *about the chief subjects he inquires into*.¹¹⁴ One thinks immediately of his prolonged protestations in *Republic* VI about his lack of qualifications for talking about the good: what he has, he implies, is no more than 'opinions without knowledge' (506C6).¹¹⁵ Here in the *Theaetetus* he explains his position by saying that the god

compels me to be the midwife, and has prevented me from giving birth – so, as for myself, I am not at all wise, nor is there any discovery of such a sort [sc. a wise one] that has been born to me as offspring of my soul. (150C7–D2)

What others expect from him is an authoritative answer, and that he can't give because he hasn't discovered it.

My own claim is that not only Plato's Socrates but Plato himself permanently retains the role of midwife. By any modern reckoning the passage just discussed will have been written relatively late (because the *Theaetetus* is a relatively late dialogue);¹¹⁶ nonetheless I take it to be describing how Plato saw the role of the philosopher – that is, of any philosopher who has to live in the real world, including himself as well as Socrates – even at this point, and indeed at any point, in his own writing career.¹¹⁷ The particular reason why he needs Socrates to disclaim knowledge at this early point in the *Theaetetus* is because there might be a presumption that someone who actually possesses knowledge ought to be able to say what it is that

¹¹² Cf. Sedley 2004: 32.

¹¹³ Traditionally 'temperance' (which nowadays means either nothing or the wrong thing); *sôphrosunê* in ordinary Greek is something like 'self-control', but emerges from *Charmides* as closer to 'sound-mindedness'.

¹¹⁴ Cf. *Clitophon* for what I take to be some Platonist's conceit on this very point in relation to the *Republic*.

¹¹⁵ More on this context in chapters 8 and 9 below. ¹¹⁶ See section 10 below.

¹¹⁷ For most 'developmentalists', of course, Socrates the midwife will need to be separated sharply from Plato, who has a good few 'children' of his own; the portrait of Socrates in the *Theaetetus* will then have a historical ring to it.

he possesses (and the question for discussion, after all, is what knowledge is); just as Socrates in the *Charmides* claims to suppose that the young Charmides will know what 'sound-mindedness'¹¹⁸ is if, as others have suggested, he is himself 'sound-minded'.¹¹⁹ Of course it could be, and many have supposed, that the author himself, Plato, actually does claim to have the knowledge that his character disclaims, in which case he might also have a ready answer to the question about the nature of knowledge (or he might not). However it is my thesis that Plato does not think he has the knowledge he has his Socrates represent himself as lacking. I also propose that Socrates has a preferred account of the nature of knowledge to which Plato subscribes.¹²⁰ If there are problems about that account, they have to do not so much with Socrates' and/or Plato's failure to answer a straight question ('so what *is* knowledge?') as with the general limitations Plato attributes to the cognitive resources that human beings share *qua* human.

9 SOCRATES AND PLATO ON KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE

On knowledge, in the following chapters,¹²¹ I shall argue that the position of Plato's Socrates, in principle across all the dialogues, is as follows. (a) While he allows that human beings, and even he, may acquire *some* knowledge ('pieces of knowledge'),¹²² he does not believe that *full* knowledge (wisdom) about the most important things – the good, the beautiful and the just, to give Socrates' usual list¹²³ – is accessible to the human mind or soul. This is the basic position from which he begins, and from which he does not shift. However (b) at the same time he envisages the possibility that there will be, and maybe already are, more expert and accomplished philosophers than himself; and (c) within the context of the discussion of a 'best city', to which an actual city might approximate, and perhaps in some other contexts involving ideal conditions, he will sometimes introduce ideal human knowers, possessing the full, synoptic knowledge that is at the same time the unattainable terminus of the philosopher's search, and the only sort of knowledge that, ultimately, deserves to be called knowledge or wisdom.

¹¹⁸ I.e. *sôphrosunê* (see n. 113 above).

¹¹⁹ Cf. also *Euthyphro*, where Socrates is discussing *hosiotês*, 'piety', with Euthyphro because he's supposedly pious; *Laches*, which has him discussing courage with soldiers.

¹²⁰ For both the thesis and the proposal, see the following section with chapter 8.

¹²¹ See especially chapter 8. ¹²² See, e.g., chapter 11, pp. 267, 271.

¹²³ More generally, the things in question will be those on our understanding of which depends our understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live; and this will include some kind of synoptic view of the structure of things, and how they are good, beautiful and just.

To many modern interpreters, this set of claims is likely to appear implausible. For Plato's Socrates, they will say, *plainly* comes to accept the possibility of knowledge for non-divine beings; he might go on claiming, with whatever degree of plausibility, that he personally remains a know-nothing, but – in dialogues like *Phaedo* or *Republic* – he allows that others, by applying themselves in the right way, can achieve the wisdom he himself lacks. Indeed, such voices will say, the political argument of the *Republic* depends on his allowing just that: the philosopher-rulers will be qualified to rule exactly because of their knowledge, and not otherwise. One of the tasks I shall be setting myself¹²⁴ is to show either that such an interpretation fails, or – in case that seems too strong a claim – at least that it fails to explain some important aspects of central Platonic texts. Key to my argument, once again, will be understanding those two overlapping relationships, of Socrates to his interlocutors and of Plato to his readers.

However it will already be clear from the preceding sections that I shall also want to make a further claim, one that will probably strike the same objectors not just as implausible but as preposterous: namely that *Plato shares the position I have attributed to his Socrates*. In other words, he retains the position of know-nothing that he has Socrates adopt, I believe with full seriousness, in the 'Socratic' dialogues – so that, from this perspective as from others, the label 'Socratic' will pick out nothing distinctive about them. On the normal 'sceptical'/'developmental'¹²⁵ view, the so-called 'middle'¹²⁶ dialogues like the *Phaedo* and *Republic* show Plato proposing through his Socrates that knowledge, of the newly introduced forms,¹²⁷ is after all possible. This new Socrates, on the same interpretation, accepts that others, at least, may acquire the knowledge he himself lacks, and even becomes a bit of a metaphysician himself, a friend of Plato's new darlings (the forms) – while also still retaining traces of his old, know-nothing self. One of the eventual outcomes of my overall argument will be to have claimed to remove, or at least mitigate, this apparent contradiction at the heart of such 'normal' views of Plato: Plato keeps Socrates on as main speaker, I shall propose, because Socrates *remains* his *persona*, his mask. However in the meantime it will appear that this argument of mine will have several mountains to climb. Is it not *obvious*, even *uncontroversial* (some will say),

¹²⁴ See especially chapters 2 and 7.

¹²⁵ Once again, I treat these two trends in interpretation, if somewhat crudely, as going together.

¹²⁶ For this term see n. 11 above (and *passim* below).

¹²⁷ On which see the following section. Quite why a greater optimism about human cognitive capacities should go along with the introduction of a special theory of *transcendent* objects is in my view something of a mystery; but let that pass for the moment.

that the Socrates of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* has abandoned the position, as stated by his counterpart in the *Apology*, that there is a kind of wisdom that is peculiarly human – to know one's own ignorance; and that the gods alone possess the wisdom that we long for but shall never achieve?¹²⁸ By comparison with the difficulty of showing that anything so obvious is actually not the case (so it might be said), any tensions in Plato's portrait of Socrates – as someone who now does, now does not think knowledge possible – will seem like a molehill. We shall see. Meanwhile it should be clear enough that if the 'developmental' interpreters turned out to be right on this point, my own project, for showing that Plato is 'essentially a Socratic' from beginning to end, might well be considered holed below the waterline before leaving port; for it is in his theory of knowledge, and the allegedly revolutionary metaphysics of forms, that Plato is held (by the same interpreters) to have broken most emphatically with Socrates.

10 ON FORMS (AND THE DATING OF THE DIALOGUES)

For those who accept some version of the 'developmental' reading I have been proposing to reject,¹²⁹ a crucial factor will, then, usually be – what such interpreters call – the introduction of (Platonic) *forms*. In the preceding parts of this book I have frequently referred to these entities as if they were known and familiar (which is actually how Plato himself typically operates),¹³⁰ because to have done otherwise might have appeared as an endorsement of the view that there are some dialogues in which forms do not appear and others in which they do. It would be more accurate, to my mind, to say that there are some dialogues in which a certain kind of *language* – typically references to 'the *eidos* [or *idea*] 'of *x*', or to 'the *x* itself', and to particular things in the ordinary world as 'sharing in' these *eidē* (or *ideai*) – begins to be used about forms, and other dialogues in which, by and large, such language is not used; and that, of course, is an entirely different matter, insofar as it will allow that forms, whatever these are, may still be present even in those dialogues where the language in question is (by and large) not used.

'Whatever forms are': it is a hard task to say quite what a Platonic form is, and indeed it is a task that for the most part Plato himself fails to address, in any single dialogue or set of dialogues or in any systematic way. I myself

¹²⁸ For the *Apology*, see especially chapter 1 below.

¹²⁹ I.e. a reading that in particular sees a significant movement on Plato's part away from Socrates in the so-called 'middle' (post-'Socratic') dialogues.

¹³⁰ See n. 136 below.

shall prefer to operate, at least for the moment,¹³¹ with the barest of specifications of what it is to be a (Platonic) form, drawn from the sorts of terms in which Socrates operates in the central books of the *Republic*: the 'form of beauty' (justice, good . . .) will be that real item in which a particular beautiful (just, good . . .) thing 'shares', that 'sharing' being what causes the thing to be beautiful (just, good . . .), insofar as it is beautiful (just, good . . .). The important aspects of a form as seen in this minimal way are, first, that it is something *real*, and so something there to be discovered (or at least in principle to be discovered), and second that it is only by discovering, and as it were 'grasping', this real item that we shall fully understand whatever it is said to be the form 'of' – i.e. beauty (justice, goodness . . .), where the 'of' serves as no more than an identifying mark, insofar as the form actually *is* beauty (justice, goodness . . .), or rather is primarily what it is. As for the question when Plato first began to subscribe to the existence of such entities,¹³² my own proposal is that we should accept one or the other of two theses, one weaker and one stronger: (i) that items of the kind in question are actually present even in, or form part of the background even to, dialogues that do not use language like 'the form of x' or 'the x itself', and 'sharing in' (the stronger thesis); or (ii) that, as he looks back¹³³ on such dialogues from the vantage-point of the *Republic*, Plato/Socrates sees such items as presupposed or required by their argument, and easily supplied (the weaker thesis).¹³⁴

It is quite difficult to see how one might begin to decide between the two theses; but for my purposes that is hardly of great moment, insofar as my own chief concern is to establish – at least – the continuity in *Plato's mind* between the various parts of his corpus (which at the very least sets limits on the degree of actual discontinuity). If he did not see all the implications of what he was writing when he was composing prior to the *Republic*, and prior to any other dialogue in which form-language occurs,¹³⁵ (a) we

¹³¹ My overall strategy in the book will be gradually to allow evidence about how 'forms' are to be understood to accumulate, much as Plato does, and without trying to spell things out in the kind of detail that Plato himself omitted to give us. I shall ultimately associate 'forms' with a particular, more general feature of Platonic thinking.

¹³² I am assuming that my skeleton description is sufficient to pick out forms as they appear in the so-called 'middle dialogues': if not, whatever other features are required should be deemed added.

¹³³ The discussion here is still primarily about the relationship between *Republic* and pre-*Republic* dialogues, though there will also be implications for other, later, dialogues (like *Theaetetus*, or *Laos*), which also allegedly omit reference to forms.

¹³⁴ Of course there is also in principle a third option – that the 'new' metaphysics represents a clear break with Socrates. I shall discuss this third option below; meanwhile I naturally exclude it as a real option, given that I have admitted that it would be sufficient to destroy my overall thesis.

¹³⁵ Especially when asking that type of question that typically surfaces in the so-called 'Socratic' dialogues, 'what is x?'. (I shall shortly be providing a rather fuller justification of that 'so-called' than I have so far given.)

shall never be able to tell if that was the explanation for his failure to use such language (as opposed, for example, to his not having any use for it); and (b) he may as well have seen the implications, since he writes, in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, as if 'forms' are already a familiar topic,¹³⁶ so in any case projecting them back into the pre-*Republic* dialogues.¹³⁷ This will of course mean that the 'developmentalist' interpretation is still in play, and may even – for all we know – have got hold of an interesting truth about Plato's intellectual history.¹³⁸ But again, what matters from my own perspective is that even if Plato did move on, philosophically, in the way the 'developmentalists' suppose, *Plato* will have seen the move in a quite different way: not as a momentous shift, one that would make him finally his own man, but rather as a working out of what was already there in any case.¹³⁹

From earlier sections, however, it will be at once clear that the kind of interpretation I am proposing could at best, and most politely, be called controversial. The broad church of interpreters I have called 'doctrinalists' might generally be sympathetic to my approach (as tending towards a proper 'unitarianism'), even while being much more lavish in their expectations of Plato's philosopher than I have been, and indeed intend to remain. By contrast, their 'sceptical'/'developmentalist' rivals will tend to see the forms – the, or a, 'theory' of forms – as a peculiarly Platonic construct, and something that divides Plato from the metaphysically innocent Socrates, i.e. the Socrates of the 'Socratic' dialogues. The new metaphysics, according to these interpreters, provides Plato with a stable set of objects, an entire 'intelligible world over and above the sensible',¹⁴⁰ to be accessed, mapped, and explored by the philosopher, escaping from the fluxing world of particulars. The division of the Platonic dialogues into 'early', 'middle', and 'late', now commonly accepted in English-speaking countries and beyond, mainly rests on one version or another of this reading of Plato's intellectual progress: 'early' is also 'Socratic', while to the 'middle' dialogue group

¹³⁶ See chapter 9 below, where I shall argue in particular that the way in which Socrates introduces the crucial topic of the *form of the good* in *Republic* vi is designed to indicate that the topic will be familiar to anyone who has read a range of what we have come to treat as earlier dialogues. (I shall be turning immediately to the justification for such dating.) Similarly with the *Phaedo*.

¹³⁷ That is, if they were not there already.

¹³⁸ Plato's 'Socratic period', or 'Socrates in (early) Plato' will then – again, for all we know – remain perfectly legitimate objects of study: see, for example, the voluminous work of Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith, or of Mark McPherran.

¹³⁹ I shall now go on, in effect, to discuss whether this latter view of the matter would be plausible – or whether we need, after all (and from my own point of view, disastrously), to let the third option (see n. 134 above) back in.

¹⁴⁰ Sedley 2004: 100.

belong those works in which this allegedly grand new metaphysical theory figures. ('Late' dialogues used to be, typically, those in which Plato retreated from the theory, or resiled from important aspects of it; this part of the narrative is now much less clear than it used to be, largely because it is generally agreed that the *Timaeus*, which makes heavy use of 'middle' form theory, must itself be late, and cannot conveniently be shunted to an earlier position.)

Now I do not for a moment wish to dispute either that the dialogues were written in a certain order (although we certainly cannot rule out the possibility that Plato went in for significant revision, either of parts of dialogues, or of whole works), or that the order proposed by the advocates of the tripartite early-middle-late division is substantially right. Studies of Plato's style have shown that the dialogues do fall into three groups; and what is more, the stylometrists' dating – which starts from the fact, independently confirmed, that the *Laws* was the last work that Plato wrote – generally coincides with the division, quite independently proposed, into 'early', 'middle', and 'late'. This cosy picture is a little disturbed by the fact that according to the results of stylometric analysis three of the 'middle' dialogues, i.e. *Cratylus*, *Phaedo* and *Symposium*, all of them clearly (for those who see things this way) containing the 'new metaphysics', belong to the group that Plato wrote first.¹⁴¹ However (a) this group is a very large one; (b) the three dialogues in question might have been written late in the early period, and so in effect contiguously with the dialogues in the second group; and (c) in any case there is no particular reason for supposing that changes in a philosopher's thinking should march exactly in parallel with changes in the way he expresses his thinking, or indeed that there should be any connection at all between the first kind of changes and the second.

So, nothing *too* disturbing there, and by and large, there need be no great disagreement about the order of composition of the dialogues, so long as we set aside the complication that any particular dialogue might have been revised more or less substantially, and so may represent a product of different times or periods.¹⁴² What I believe there should be disagreement

¹⁴¹ 'At first sight, the division into three stylistic groups [proposed by a number scholars working mainly in the nineteenth century] seems to confirm [the] theory of Plato's development [in question], since all of his "Socratic" dialogues are firmly located in the earliest group. But this first sight is misleading. The central group does not at all coincide with what are called the "middle" dialogues, since the intermediate group defined stylistically includes both *Parmenides* and *Theaetetus*, which are generally counted as "late" from a developmental point of view. On the other hand, the "early" group includes *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Cratylus*. A traditional developmentalist who recognizes that the stylistic division is chronological must simply accept the fact that Plato's stylistic and philosophical developments do not proceed at the same pace' (Kahn 2002: 96).

¹⁴² See, e.g., Thesleff 1982.

about is the question of what precisely, if anything, should be inferred from that order of composition. I have in earlier sections indicated my strong opposition to the idea that it should be read in terms of the maturing of Plato's thought – the advent of Platonic maturity after a Socratic childhood. This opposition may now be spelled out more precisely: what I oppose, in particular, is the notion that Plato grew up by becoming a metaphysician, one who invented – or, better, saw himself as having invented – a set of entities to whose existence Socrates was oblivious.

Here things become complicated. Presumably no one would want to say that Plato thought of his Socrates as ever having been in the position of the 'sight-lovers' of *Republic* v, who don't recognize the existence of anything beyond particulars.¹⁴³ So maybe 'hadn't recognized' forms, in Socrates' case, ought to be taken simply as connoting 'hadn't *fully* recognized' them; in which case, given the fact that I accept the possibility of the weak thesis that Plato might have come to see the Socrates of the 'Socratic' dialogues, or the way he talks there, as presupposing Platonic forms, there would hardly be any room for disagreement. However everything here depends, once more, on what a 'Platonic form' is supposed to be. At the centre of the debate stands Aristotle, who famously declared¹⁴⁴ that the difference between Plato and Socrates was that Socrates did not make the objects of his definitions 'separate' in the way that Plato did. But this is Aristotle's terminology – Plato never says of his forms quite what Aristotle interprets him as saying. So which particular feature of forms is Aristotle referring to? And again, is it our Socrates, the Socrates of the 'Socratic' dialogues, that he has in mind, or the real one? We have no good reason for *assuming* either that the two Socrateses are the same or that Aristotle thought they were (and he doesn't *say* that he is talking about the literary Socrates).¹⁴⁵

We may take the two questions together. The best guess, in relation to the first, is that Aristotle is referring to that undoubtedly Platonic contrast between forms, as constituting an intelligible 'world' of stable and therefore – in principle, if not actually – knowable entities, and the

¹⁴³ See chapter 6 below. Briefly, the 'theory' in question is that beauty (or justice, or whatever) is nothing but particular things. The Socrates of the 'Socratic' dialogues plainly doesn't think *that*; he wants to know what *the thing* courage (*Laches*) is.

¹⁴⁴ See *Metaphysics* M, 1078b27–32.

¹⁴⁵ There is a separate argument to be made in relation to Socratic moral psychology: in that case what Aristotle attributes to 'old Socrates' is actually a – much distorted – version of what we find in the 'Socratic' (and generally pre-*Republic*) dialogues. See Rowe 2002a. Whether or not the Socrates of these dialogues knows about forms is a different matter (and up to a point in Plato's own control).

moving, even 'fluxing', world of particular objects familiar to the senses.¹⁴⁶ If this sensible world is in perpetual flux, and forms are stable, then they can't be part of this world; so they must constitute, or be part of, a different one, in some loose usage of the term 'world'. Now it probably would be reasonable enough to say that, if Plato had wanted to claim that all of this was somehow implicit in dialogues like *Euthyphro*, *Laches* or *Lysis*, then it would look implausible in the extreme. It would be hard, at any rate for someone who wasn't already a convinced Platonist, to maintain that this elaborate kind of metaphysical position – crucially including the idea of the ordinary perceptible world as fluxing – was *needed* for understanding what was going on in these little pieces.¹⁴⁷ So far, then, Aristotle's reading of Socrates as a non-separator seems to fit well enough with the Socrates of the 'Socratic' dialogues. However what has come to be called a 'two worlds' interpretation of the post-'Socratic' dialogues is, in my view, in no way inevitable. It is, rather, one of several different ways that Plato has of representing the relationship between forms and the physical world, the world of experience, or more generally between forms and particulars. (Or alternatively, to keep what I have called my 'weaker thesis' in sight: perhaps, to the extent that the Plato of the 'post-Socratic' dialogues was a two-worlder, he came to think of the Socrates, and the Plato, of the 'Socratic' dialogues in the same light.)

That the 'two worlds' view is just one of several Platonic perspectives on things is particularly plain in the context of the *Sophist*, when the Eleatic Visitor criticizes people whom he identifies simply as 'friends of the forms' for failing to recognize that things that change can be *real*, as well as things that are unchanging.¹⁴⁸ For supporters of the early-middle-late division of the dialogues, this will be a case of Plato belatedly correcting himself (*Sophist* is one of the stylistically late group of dialogues) – part of a general rethinking of his 'middle'-period metaphysics. But if we move away, as I propose, we should, from the whole idea of a 'middle' period marked off by a grand metaphysical theory (a theory itself supposedly recognized by a later Plato himself as mistaken, or at any rate needing radical overhaul or restatement), then the *Sophist* context can be seen just as a redressing of

¹⁴⁶ See *Timaeus* 27D–28A, 38A–B, 49A–50A.

¹⁴⁷ But note e.g., *Republic* VI, 485B1–3, where the opposition between an eternal being, which 'does not wander as a consequence of coming into being and passing away' is introduced on the back of no more than a distinction between forms and particulars (which are described as 'many and existing in all sorts of ways', and things in which non-philosophers 'wander' (VI, 484B5–6).

¹⁴⁸ The thought is introduced, apparently with firmness, at *Sophist* 249B: this is in the middle of a complex dialectical argument, but one of the final outcomes of that argument appears to be as stated.

the balance.¹⁴⁹ Yes, from one perspective there is a gulf between forms and sensibles: forms are unchanging, sensibles changing; forms are knowable, sensibles unknowable; and so on. So, from this perspective, talk of different 'worlds'¹⁵⁰ is reasonable enough, and in *Timaeus*' account of the physical universe in the *Timaeus* the contrast between what *is* – the forms – and what merely *becomes* – things in this world – is central.¹⁵¹ Yet there are other perspectives under which the contrast between forms and sensible things not only goes along with, but is inseparable from, the idea of a connection between them. Thus, as we shall see, in all three of the similes Socrates introduces in *Republic* VI–VII in place of a proper account of the form of the good, the similes of sun, line and cave,¹⁵² it is entirely essential that the lower levels of objects relate to, and are informed by, the highest: the shadows on the wall of the cave are the shadows of the objects being carried along the wall behind the prisoners, and these objects in turn are related to, are copies of, things in the world outside the cave. Again, the argument in Book V addressed to those 'sight-lovers' (see above) itself depends heavily on the idea that even if we can't discover what beauty – for example – is from particular beautiful things or kinds of thing, nevertheless these particulars are capable of telling us *something* about what beauty is or is like. And it could scarcely be otherwise, insofar as particulars are what they are by virtue of their relationship to forms. In *this* sort of context, talk of separate 'worlds' looks considerably less useful than it may do in others (and, one may add, the physical world will no longer be one of flux: it will acquire a modicum of stability from its association with forms).¹⁵³ Forms may be – evidently are – capable of existing independently of particulars, but particulars could not conceivably exist independently of forms; and for so long as there is a physical world – which Plato gives every sign of thinking eternal¹⁵⁴ – forms and particulars are irrevocably tied together.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁹ See also *Parmenides* (133B–134E) for an argument from another Eleatic philosopher against erecting too strong an opposition between forms and sensible things.

¹⁵⁰ One place where Plato himself probably comes to using the language of 'worlds' is when he has Socrates talk of 'the *noētos topos*', 'the intelligible place', or 'the place of what is intelligible', in his interpretation of the image of the cave, and so outside the image itself (*Republic* VII, 517B5).

¹⁵¹ See n. 146 above.

¹⁵² For the simile of the cave, see the following Introduction.

¹⁵³ In *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, taken together, an extreme Heracliteanism and an incomprehensibly fluxing world are rejected as firmly as the view of the 'friends of the forms'.

¹⁵⁴ For a modest justification of at least part of this claim (that the world, for Plato, had no beginning), see chapter 10 below.

¹⁵⁵ The *Phaedo* is perhaps the primary source, in Plato, for the two-world reading of the relationship between forms and particulars. I address, and arrive at analogous conclusions for, this dialogue in chapter 2 below.

Another important aspect of this connection between forms and particulars is especially prominent in the *Republic*. The reason why we human beings need to gain knowledge of the forms, so Socrates insists there, is to acquire some kind of model or paradigm for organizing our lives in cities: for legislating, in order to enable us to live the best life possible. According to his argument, we all want knowledge of the good; and we want it because we want to be happy. If, as I proposed in the preceding section, the Socrates of the *Republic* thinks knowledge beyond any merely human philosopher, i.e. any human philosopher not somehow in direct communication with the gods, even the philosopher-rulers of Callipolis – if some approximation to Callipolis were ever realized – would in fact have to occupy their off-duty philosophical time investigating forms not just for the sheer pleasure of it but for the sake of what the truth would finally mean for them (and the city) – the fulfilment of that passionate desire, that *erōs*, talked about at *Republic* VI, 490B5–7, which affects every genuine philosopher;¹⁵⁶ the understanding of a good, if only they recognized it, that is desired even by those untouched by philosophy. For the good is that ‘which *every* soul pursues, and [she] does everything for the sake of this, surmising that it is something . . .’¹⁵⁷

In the *Republic* as a whole, the metaphysical and epistemological focus is on two themes: the impossibility of accessing forms from particulars (e.g., particular actions),¹⁵⁸ on the one hand, and on the necessity of gaining access to forms in order to improve the quality of our lives, whether in the private or the public sphere.¹⁵⁹ Philosophers in the *Republic* may reject the political life in favour of the life of the mind, or else they may wish that they could. The current practice, Socrates says, is that philosophy and politics are carried on by different people, and even in the good city philosophers would prefer it if, impossibly, circumstances allowed them not to take on their share of political rule.¹⁶⁰ In other words, the option of a purely philosophical life, under ordinary conditions, is a possible one; and those who live it may feel they ‘have been transported to the isles of the blest even when alive’.¹⁶¹ (One thinks here of the ‘leaders in philosophy’

¹⁵⁶ At the end of his search, ‘having had intercourse with what really is, having engendered intelligence and truth, [he] would know and truly live and be nurtured and so cease from birth-pangs’.

¹⁵⁷ *Republic* VI, 505D11–E1.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Socrates’ application of what he calls the ‘vulgar’ (*phortika*) tests to the definition of justice in Book IV: our just man will be ‘outside’, ‘beyond’ (*ektos*) actions like temple-robbery, theft, treachery . . . (442E–443B).

¹⁵⁹ See especially *Republic* VII, 517C4–5.

¹⁶⁰ *Republic* V, 474C–E; VII, 519B–521A.

¹⁶¹ VII, 519C5–6.

Socrates refers to in the *Theaetetus*:¹⁶² these pure philosophers are in any case, I take it, an imaginative projection – perhaps his idealized Eleatics.)¹⁶³

But however pleasant philosophy may be, indeed the most pleasant thing in the world, pleasure is not itself the good: Plato devoted the best part of a long dialogue, the *Philebus*, to establishing the point. The chief motivation for philosophy, as it is portrayed throughout the dialogues, is not the ‘sight’ of truth itself, but rather what is to be *derived* from that sight.¹⁶⁴ Thus it is that the philosopher’s pleasures, according to Socrates in *Republic* ix, are a matter of his or her being filled up ‘with the kind of filling up that belongs to true belief and knowledge’¹⁶⁵ and intelligence *and, in short, all of excellence*.¹⁶⁶ In a dialogue that is formally structured around the subject of the nature of justice, ‘all of excellence (*aretē*)’ could scarcely exclude justice – and in any case, in the context the philosopher *is* the archetypal just person; that, then, will be part of the source of his pleasures and his happiness. In other words, I take it that what he derives from philosophy will be an understanding about how to live life best; and unless Plato holds that one can be just without actually doing anything except studying,¹⁶⁷ that will mean understanding how to make the right choices in real-life situations involving the real possibility of injustice.¹⁶⁸ (*A fortiori*, the person who devotes himself to philosophy, at least on the Socratic model, will be no hermit or visionary, but a citizen, friend, fellow-soldier, spouse . . . The one thing he will abstain from is politics, except to the extent that being a citizen requires it.)¹⁶⁹

My claim, then, is that while the ‘world’ of forms can, in some circumstances, be sharply distinguished from the sensible world, in other contexts the relationship between forms and sensibles requires to be understood differently. In particular, in the *Republic* itself Socrates insists that we need to ‘grasp’ forms precisely in order to understand things in this world better;

¹⁶² See n. 56 above.

¹⁶³ Or are they perhaps members of the Academy, and the counterparts of these in the fictional world of the dialogues: serious young men who talk to Socrates instead of going off into politics? (‘Eleatics’: see text to nn. 55, 56 above.)

¹⁶⁴ In general terms Socrates seems to be undecided quite how to treat those who devote themselves exclusively to philosophy: they – whoever they are – may tend to get further than he does, and they may live a delightful life; but he doesn’t himself join them, and perhaps as an able-bodied citizen cannot. So *exclusive* devotion to philosophy has to be for those physically unfit to live a full life as a citizen (cf. the example of Theages: *Republic* vi, 496b).

¹⁶⁵ The appearance of these two things together in the list is interesting; see chapter 6 below.

¹⁶⁶ ix, 585b14–c1.

¹⁶⁷ As Richard Kraut does (Kraut 2003); but see my counter-argument in Rowe 2003a.

¹⁶⁸ I note in passing that this is still a markedly *Socratic* view of things (as I defined this earlier): 585b14–c1, indeed, surely implies the familiar identification of virtue/excellence and knowledge.

¹⁶⁹ See especially *Republic* vi, 496a–e (the passage that mentions the case of Theages: see above).

without forms, we can do no better than a partial understanding, which by itself will lead into error. The reason for this is that what we experience at the level of sense, and of ordinary life, is as it were fragments of beauty, goodness and justice – things that are e.g., only beautiful to *this* person, good under *these* circumstances; actions that are only just under *those* circumstances – when what we need in order to make the right choices is to know what beauty, goodness and justice are, themselves. When Aristotle seizes on stability versus flux as the defining feature of the relation between forms and sensible things,¹⁷⁰ he is picking out only one of many such features, others of which cut across and soften the distinction that his version of the relation implies. The reason why he makes the choice he does is that he tends to regard separation as Plato's big mistake: take that away, and from Aristotle's point of view we should be on the road to perfectly respectable universals, which are merely secondary beings or *ousiai* (real being, says Aristotle, reversing the Platonic view, belongs to particulars).

But there is no reason why we should follow Aristotelian doxography here. If the opposition stable/fluxing looks un-Socratic, other ways of treating forms in relation to particulars look entirely consistent with the sorts of things that Plato's Socrates is talking about in the so-called 'Socratic' dialogues. (More flesh, and justification, will be added to this proposal in later parts of this book.) From these other perspectives, form-'theory' looks considerably less grand, and significantly less innovative, if indeed it is innovative at all.¹⁷¹ In that case, the basis for the now traditional division between 'early' (metaphysically innocent) and 'middle' dialogues (those using or referring to forms) will for all practical purposes have disappeared.¹⁷² Aristotle's 'authority' amounts to nothing; instead of giving us some kind of privileged, because close-up, perspective on the history of philosophy, he is merely telling us where he thinks his teacher Plato went wrong, and where – with the greatest respect – he himself will put things right.

Thus while the chronology of the composition of the dialogues ought to be a relatively uncontroversial matter (if as usual we except the possibilities of revision), what has been done with that chronology in the last century

¹⁷⁰ See above.

¹⁷¹ Even the idea of the sensible world as fluxing has at least a close relation in the perfectly ordinary Socratic idea that things said to be, e.g., good will typically turn out actually to be bad; or that actions that are apparently just under some conditions will turn out unjust under others.

¹⁷² There remains that apparent, crucial shift in moral psychology between the Socrates of the pre-*Republic* dialogues and the Socrates of *Republic* iv, who divides the soul; much will depend here on the success of my argument in chapter 5, which will attempt to show that Plato thought he had a way of keeping *both* models of human behaviour.

or so – the division of the dialogues into ‘Socratic’ – ‘middle’ (Platonic) – ‘late’ (Platonic) – needs to be set aside. Or rather: the division in question should be set aside unless and until it is shown to be useful, as opposed to merely constraining and inhibiting our reading.¹⁷³ It should no longer be used as a starting-point; for it is, for the most part, based on a perspective (mainly Aristotle’s) which is not only one that we need not share,¹⁷⁴ but one that – I claim – Plato himself patently did not share (as well having no reason to share it).¹⁷⁵ There are three groups of dialogues that show significant stylistic differences between them, but (a) these groups do not coincide with the traditional early-middle-late grouping, and (b) we have no reason to suppose in advance that the fact that the dialogues were probably written in this rough order has any consequences in itself for the debate between the ‘developmentalists’ and those who, like myself, favour a more ‘unitarian’ reading of Plato’s thinking overall.

Chronology comes to matter, if it matters at all, in two connections. Firstly, it will often be useful to know something about the order of composition of the dialogues for the purpose of identifying cross-references, the majority of which are necessarily implicit (given that dialogues are or include localized conversations).¹⁷⁶ Secondly, there remains that one apparently significant shift in Plato’s thinking that I have proposed, however reluctantly, to recognize: the shift away from a strictly intellectualist theory of action towards a position that would allow at least some purchase for a rival view, according to which our reason may be besieged and even overthrown by irrational desires. In this one respect my reading of Plato may itself seem to begin to slide over from unitarianism towards developmentalism; and in this one respect I recognize a division between *Republic* and post-*Republic* dialogues, on the one hand, and pre-*Republic* dialogues on the other. It still remains to be established, however, just how significant this shift is, and how significant Plato thinks it to be.

¹⁷³ I cite an example of such ‘inhibition’ below (n. 176).

¹⁷⁴ That is, insofar as there are no finally compelling arguments for it, and – as I hope to show – reasonably compelling arguments against it.

¹⁷⁵ The point is not just that he makes Socrates talk about forms in *Republic* and elsewhere (which would be to rely on the assumption – unproven and unprovable, even unlikely – that his Socrates only ever says things he, Plato, thinks Socrates would have been happy to say); it is rather that he has him talk about them *as if they were familiar*, and in contexts where *readers* as well as interlocutors are evidently meant to be familiar with them (because of what I take to be unmistakable intertextual references). See especially chapter 9 below.

¹⁷⁶ ‘Developmentalist’ assumptions have naturally inhibited the search for such cross-references: if Plato is perpetually moving on, he will rarely need to look back except to indicate that he is moving on.

II THE NEED FOR A HOLISTIC INTERPRETATION

There will be many different types of readers of Plato. Some will merely dip into him, picking out a particular dialogue because it looks attractive, or impressive, or puzzling; and some of those will be disappointed, or even repelled, and go no further. Others, perhaps the ones that Plato had in mind, will attempt something more ambitious: one could imagine individuals, back in the fourth century BCE, waiting for each successive dialogue as it appeared, sometimes perhaps announced by a performance by the author himself. And then there are the academic readers, like myself, for whom reading Plato is – by good fortune, or because they have planned it that way – part of what they do for a living. Some of them will be philosophers, some classicists, some both; some will live in comparative literature departments or departments of political theory. It is a presumption of the present book that it is a common task of all of these academic readers to throw light on Plato's texts for those other types of readers: to try to explain what is strange, puzzling, or simply complex. Different kinds of specialists will essay different aspects of this task: philosophers will take a special interest in what they see as the hard arguments, literary experts in aspects of intertextuality, the interplay of character; and so on. Instead of merely allowing the texts to work their effect, such readers typically attempt to say what effect Plato might have *intended* to achieve, by what means, and (in the case of the philosophical specialists) how effective he is in achieving it.¹⁷⁷

The present book is an example of this kind of activity. It starts from a point that is probably close to being universally agreed: that no account of any part or aspect of Plato will be complete unless it pays attention to all the manifold aspects of his writing, whether philosophical, literary, dramatic, or . . . (however many aspects different interpreters may recognize). However my approach differs from others' especially in the degree of interdependence that I see as existing between the different elements that go to make up Plato's writings. There are very few places, I claim, where Plato's intentions can be read directly from the surface of the text, not because there is uncertainty about who he means to speak for him, but rather because the person who speaks for him – Socrates – is always speaking for him *under particular conditions*, which he himself has created, for purposes of his own, and which help to shape what he says and how

¹⁷⁷ Even some academic readers purport to content themselves with relaying their own experiences of a given text, apparently on the grounds that that is the maximum that any interpreter ever achieves, whatever he or she may claim. Such relativism seems peculiarly out of place with philosophical authors: see Rowe 2002b.

he says it. Only when we have fully understood what those particular conditions are, and how they may have affected the shape of what Plato has put into Socrates' mouth, can we begin to understand what it is that he is saying (wants to say). In other words, it is not just that we need to understand the arguments in their literary and dramatic context, and understand how they relate to their 'frames'. That we certainly do need to do. But we must – I propose – also accept that the structure of the arguments themselves may be at least partly determined by extraneous factors like the state of understanding of the addressees (interlocutors, whether individuals or types), and that almost any statement Socrates or other main speakers make may need to be understood as representing a particular perspective, and so may require correction or completion from other contexts. The general picture – the one I wish to promote – is of a largely stable and connected set of fundamental ideas which can be approached from different directions, represented now from one angle, now from another, now partially, now more fully, with corresponding shifts of focus and emphasis; sometimes, no doubt, out of sheer pleasure and inventiveness (for Plato is the wittiest of writers), but more importantly out of a desire to draw in readers whose tolerance he expects to be as lacking as their understanding.¹⁷⁸ To end this preliminary part of the book where I began it: Platonic variety more often reflects variety of strategy than variety of – changes in – thinking.

¹⁷⁸ Once again, I should emphasize that I do not mean for a moment to exclude an exploratory, or more generally reflective, moment in Plato's thinking. That, after all, would make me just another 'doctrinalist'. When I talk of 'a largely stable and connected set of fundamental ideas', I am referring specifically to Plato's *fundamental* ideas or starting-points; and those, of course, include as one prominent item that awareness of the limits of human understanding which his Socrates, and I believe he (Plato) himself, have thoroughly internalized. So beyond those fundamental ideas, all is in principle to play for, e.g., in relation to the organization of society, the best kind of individual life, or indeed the fundamental principles of all existence (starting with that as yet elusive item, the form of the good).